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LATE-BREAKING NEWS: Vaccine researcher loses funding—see insert

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Recovered autistic children!

October 3, 2004 was a monumental day in the history of autism. The conventional belief is that autism is an untreatable, life-long disability, except for a few sporadic exceptions. In defiance of conventional belief, a group of nine now normal or virtually normal, formerly autistic children were introduced to the media, and to a cheering crowd of over 1,200 parents and professionals, by stage and screen star Lou Diamond Phillips at the October DAN! (Defeat Autism Now!) Conference.

The children, ranging in age from 3 to 12, were led by Lou, Pied-Piper style, into the Grand Ballroom of the Westin Los Angeles Airport Hotel. The children and their proud parents stood on the stage while Lou, who obviously enjoyed his task, interviewed each child. Phillips had become acquainted with each youngster during the hour preceding the group's grand entrance into the ballroom, and conversed with each child as a friend.

He started with 11-year-old Ben, who told him—and the audience, many of whom were in tears—about his most embarrassing moment. Ben also talked about the things he has wanted to be when grown up, including a paleontologist and now a movie director.

Seven-year-old Lucas told Lou he wanted to be a football player, then, laughing, "President."

Jack, 5 years old, was surprised by the large audience. (We later heard from Jack's mother, who had informed him that he would be seeing some of her friends at the meeting, that Jack had remarked, "You sure have a lot of friends.") He could tell Phillips his age in English and in Spanish, and talked about his friends in school.

After his very friendly, highly interactive conversations with each of the children, Lou ended his presentation by saying, "These incredibly brave, smart, beautiful kids will grow up to be whatever they want to be." Lou and the children were given a long, well-deserved standing ovation by the delighted and enthusiastic audience.

For a DVD or VHS tape of this event, including interviews with all the children, and interviews with principals in the DAN! movement, send a donation of $25.00 or more to help the work of the Autism Research Institute. For other highlights of the Fall 2004 DAN! Conference, see page 3.

THE DANISH DATA REVISITED: new study links MMR vaccine to elevated risk of autism

A new study on the link between autism and the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccination has reached a very different conclusion than a previous study using the same database.

The earlier study, published by Kreesten Meldgaard Madsen and colleagues in 2002, analyzed data from the Danish Psychiatric Central Register and concluded that there was no association between MMR vaccination and autism. However, Gary Goldman and Edward Yazbak reanalyzed data from 1980 to 2002, after compensating for two confounding factors: a change in diagnostic criteria, and a change in the clinical population included in the database. Because the mercury-laden preservative thimerosal (also linked to autism) was removed from vaccines in Denmark in 1992, the researchers were able to analyze the effects of the MMR on children who were not exposed to this preservative as well.

Goldman and Yazbak say their data show that the prevalence of autism among 5- to 9-year-old children increased from 8.38 per 100,000 in the period before the introduction of the MMR to 71.43 per 100,000 in the year 2000, with a leveling off at the higher rate in later years. This shows, they say, that autism rates rose as the number of children receiving MMR shots increased, plateauing at about the time that full "saturation" was reached. After adjusting their data for the potentially confounding factors, the researchers found that the risk of developing autism was nearly five times greater for children receiving the MMR vaccine than for children in the pre-vaccination period. "Because thimerosal was not used in any pediatric vaccine in Denmark since 1992 and the greatest increase in autism prevalence followed that year, it is likely that one or more of the viral components or their combination in the MMR vaccine contributed to the reported increase," they say.

The researchers say that the Madsen et al. study had serious shortcomings, including improper adjustment for the ages of the subjects. "Because autism is usually diagnosed at age 5 or older in Denmark," Goldman says, "many children born in 1994 and thereafter would not have been diagnosed by the end of the study period."

The researchers note that their findings are supported by the fact that "the U.K. and U.S. introduced MMR vaccine in different years, yet both showed the first appreciable increases in autism following MMR vaccine introduction."

BMJ study: no link?

A new study by Liam Smeeth and colleagues appears to contradict the findings of Goldman and Yazbak, reporting no link between the MMR and autism. Smeeth et al. used the U.K. General Practice Research Database to identify 1294 individuals born

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California thimerosal ban signed into law

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed a bill that will prevent pregnant women or children under the age of three from receiving vaccinations with more than trace amounts of the mercury-laden preservative thimerosal, which a growing body of research links to autism. The thimerosal ban, sponsored by Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, will go into effect in July 2006.