Hasn't Jenny McCarthy done enough damage already?

By Julianna LeMieux — September 28, 2016

It was bad enough when Jenny McCarthy used her celebrity status and loud voice to back the anti-vaccine movement, shouting to anyone who would listen the fallacy that vaccines cause autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Now, it seems that promoting one non-scientific claim that harms children is just not enough for this former Playboy playmate. And, this time, what she's up to is just as bad -- or maybe even worse.

McCarthy is now exploiting vulnerable parents by promoting a treatment for ASD called hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO2). This technique provides 100% oxygen (air is 21% oxygen) in a chamber that can provide up to three times more pressure than one would experience on Earth -- resulting in an increase of oxygen in the blood.

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a legitimate therapy in limited cases, such as for the treatment of wounds, carbon monoxide and cyanide poisoning, and for certain types of infection. In fact, many major hospitals [1] offer hyperbaric oxygen therapy centers.

It is the link between using HBO2 as a treatment for ASD that is unsubstantiated and possibly dangerous. The theory behind using HBO2 for ASD treatment is based on the premise that it will decrease inflammation in the brain. We know that people with ASD do have more inflammation in their brains [2], but, we do not know whether oxygen will decrease brain inflammation or if decreasing that inflammation will improve symptoms.

The most recent literature review in Pubmed (the database of scientifically sound peer reviewed
articles) states that, "The evidence is weak for the use of HBO2 in ASD, with only one, likely flawed, randomized control study showing treatment benefit." (1) The conclusion of the article is that "HBO2 should not be recommended for ASD treatment until more conclusive favorable results and long-term outcomes are demonstrated from well-designed controlled trials."

The NIH's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [3] states that, "There's very little high quality research on complementary health approaches for ASD. There's no scientific evidence that secretin (a gastrointestinal hormone), hyperbaric oxygen, chelation therapies, or antifungal agents help people with ASD, and they may be dangerous."

Despite all of this caution and doubt, McCarthy believes that she knows better. Her organization, Generation Rescue, is holding the 3rd Annual Autism Education Summit [4] this weekend in Addison, TX (just north of Dallas) to promote HBO2 therapy for ASD.

During the conference, there will be an "expert" panel including chiropractors and osteopaths who specialize in integrative medicine (whatever that means), a young woman, Lilly Kenitz, whose credentials consist of nothing more than a YouTube video [5] talking about the impact that hyperbaric treatment had on her younger sister. There will also be a Celebrity Keynote Panel (a bit of a misnomer, as none of the panel members are celebrities, to be honest.) Joining McCarthy on the panel are other ignorant anti-vaxxers including Del Bigtree (the producer of the movie Vaxxed) and unqualified TV personalities such as Jacqueline Laurita (from Real Housewives of New Jersey -- I didn't know that either).

One of the conference's medical "experts" is Dr. Anju Usman, who had her medical license placed on probation [6] after she was accused of using "medically unwarranted treatment that may potentially result in permanent disabling injuries" to two patients. Usman is said to have demonstrated "extreme departure from rational medical judgment." The story about Usman gets uglier the more we learn, with a potential large financial gain for her and her husband, who, conveniently, sells hyperbaric oxygen chambers. (I do not think this is a coincidence.)

The money to be made with this type of treatment is enormous. For example, the Downtown Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation center in New York City charges $120 for a 90-minute chamber session. And these kids go through many sessions -- a waste of time and money -- not to mention the stress on the children who are forced to endure this nonsense.

Lastly, not only is HBO2 expensive, and time consuming, it is not safe. Side effects include fatigue and lightheadedness. Rarely seen, but possible, complications are damage to the lungs, a buildup of fluid or rupture of the middle ear, damage to the sinuses, changes in vision (causing nearsightedness or myopia) and oxygen poisoning, which can cause lung failure, fluid in the lungs, or seizures (3).

All of this taken together makes McCarthy's newest propaganda absolutely maddening. She is either shameless, ignorant or both. Studies have shown that up to three-quarters of families of children with ASD try alternative treatments, which is very easy to understand because there are so few options for ASD treatment. (2)

But, these methods that she and others are selling are a huge waste of money because they also
do not work. McCarthy and others are preying on parents who are trying to help their kids, but, are being disappointed by the pace at which science is moving with respect to ASD treatments. So, it's natural that these parents would look elsewhere. It's shameful that Jenny McCarthy and others continue to take advantage of them.

References:


(2) http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/health/ct-autism-anjum-usman-di...

(3) http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/healthlibrary/conditions/physical_medicin...