

# CBS Autism Report Irresponsible (PLUS CBS REPLY)

*By ACSH Staff — June 24, 2004*

The June 22nd CBS *Evening News* item "Vaccines Linked to Autism" by Sharyl Attkisson was a journalistic atrocity. Based on the litany of unsupported claims, and the obvious reliance on anecdotal evidence over sound science, I would guess her information came from an alarmist group still looking to blame thimerosal, a mercury-derived vaccine preservative, for causing autism.

How many times must it be said? Repeated studies have established no causal link between autism and thimerosal exposure from routine pediatric vaccines. The Institute of Medicine issued a report last month stating exactly that, as have several other health organizations including the National Immunization Program of the CDC. These reports are based on many peer-reviewed studies. Therefore, to continue to blame vaccines for autism simply because the onset of autistic symptoms coincides temporally with the pediatric vaccination schedule buys into a dangerous causal fallacy and may lead parents to opt out of having their children immunized. This will put them and their school and family contacts at increased risk for contracting a number of vaccine-preventable diseases.

And though it should not matter, given the health facts noted above, it is also worth noting that oft-repeated statement that "a half dozen childhood vaccines still have mercury" is completely erroneous. According to the CDC, none of the routine vaccines administered to U.S. preschool children today, including new formulations of hepatitis B and influenza vaccines, contain thimerosal. With the exception of some influenza and tetanus-diphtheria vaccines given to children ages seven and up, the last lot of childhood vaccines containing thimerosal expired in early 2003. Even those that still contain thimerosal do so on the order of one part per million, or 0.0001%. This amount does not violate any laws or regulations regarding safe levels of mercury exposure, and these samples are not given to infants, who are generally known to be more sensitive to mercury.

Furthermore, the 1990s autism "epidemic" has not even been proven to exist. Studies indicate that the increased rate of autism in the last decade may actually be an increase in autism recognition resulting from broader diagnostic criteria, increased media/public awareness, and the inclusion of autism on the list of disorders meriting special education by the U.S. Department of Education.

Attkisson also spoke of a special genetic susceptibility making some kids more likely to develop autism in reaction to mercury, though she provided no idea where she got her information about this strange, uncatalogued condition.

Lastly, Attkisson referred to a report by Dr. Mady Hornig in which the direct extrapolation of animal study results to humans again rears its ugly head. "The mice withdrew from their surroundings

land developed brain abnormalities affecting emotion and thinking, also like autistic children." Symptoms of autism are difficult to assess in humans, making it hard to believe that we can possibly assess them in mice. How are we to know when a mouse is withdrawing emotionally? And what exactly does it mean when a mouse develops "profound brain problems"?

This was a most unscientific report. Worse, it will have the effect of needlessly alarming parents, possibly encouraging them to avoid safe and necessary vaccinations for their kids. It is entirely irresponsible, given the lack of evidence, to frighten people into not having their children properly immunized out of fear of them developing autism. This imagined risk is far outweighed by the danger from not being [properly immunized](#) [1] against preventable diseases. How did this slip onto the CBS *Evening News*?

*Aubrey Stimola is a research intern at the American Council on Science and Health.*

**[The preceding article led CBS correspondent Sharyl Attkisson to send a reply, at which time ACSH's executive director, Dr. Gilbert Ross, e-mailed CBS thusly:]**

Dear Ms. Attkisson:

Thanks for your prompt response to our critique of your CBS news segment. As it is now Friday evening, and we would prefer to post your response along with our response thereto, we will post it Monday morning, along with our response.

--G Ross MD ACSH Medical and Executive Director

**[To which correspondent Attkisson, who as a TV reporter is likely more accustomed than ACSH to working weekends and to having need for a legal department, replied as follows:]**

Dr. Ross, please note that we feel leaving Ms. Stimola's letter up without our response all weekend is inadequate and we will be notifying our CBS legal counsel to see if they wish to pursue the matter. Thank you, however, for notifying us.

Sincerely, Sharyl

**CBS RESPONDS [without further ado, the heartless media juggernaut that is HealthFactsAndFears.com gives CBS its say, followed by CBS supporting materials, the original CBS transcript, and a reaction from ACSH]:**

**June 24, 2004**

Dear Sir:

Aubrey Stimola might do herself and your readers a service to research her facts and this issue more thoroughly before making irresponsible, unfounded criticisms of the CBS Evening News report of June 22nd regarding new research related to mercury in vaccines and autism. Text of the report is included herewith, and I urge you to publish it, so that independent-minded readers can make up their own minds as to the accuracy of the report and of Stimola's critique.

There are no unsupported claims in the CBS News report. There was no reliance on anecdotal evidence over sound science as Stimola claims. In fact, the bulk of the report was based on the latest published, peer reviewed study in mice from a Columbia University medical doctor who was

primarily funded by the University of California San Diego Medical Investigation of Neurodevelopmental Disorders Institute. She also received funding by the National Institutes of Health; an anti-mercury advocacy group: Coalition for Safe Minds; and the Ellison Foundation (which primarily funds research on infectious diseases and aging issues). This research is neither anecdotal nor unsubstantiated. (The abstract can be found at:

<http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/dynapage.taf?file=/mp/journal/vaop/ncurrent/abs/4001529a.html> [2])

Further, it supports and builds on extensive published research. There are literally hundreds of relevant published articles. None of them alone establishes a causal link between vaccines and autism; however, taken as a body of evidence, many prominent researchers believe it suggests an association between mercury/thimerosal exposure in vaccines and a range of neurodisorders, including autism and ADD. The researchers have been trained or teach at such places as Harvard, Yale and Northeastern. A small sampling of this research and other interesting background is cited below so that, again, readers can investigate for themselves and make up their own minds. (Many other publishers, including WebMD deemed the Columbia University study noteworthy:

[http://my.webmd.com/content/article/88/99936.htm?action=related\\_link](http://my.webmd.com/content/article/88/99936.htm?action=related_link) [3])

Stimola stated that repeated studies have established no causal link between autism and thimerosal exposure ! She fails to point out several facts. First, those studies have likewise not been able to rule out a link. Stating there is no link is quite different than stating that studies failed to either prove or dispel a link; the latter of which is the case. And it s worthy to note that even epidemiologists involved in such studies, as well as experts from the World Health Organization, admit that if a genetic mercury sensitivity exists in a subset of the population, epidemiological studies would not be likely to detect it.

Ms. Stimola also fails to note the flaw in relying solely on the CDC for vaccine safety information: the CDC is one agency implicated in alleged vaccine lapses. It is the CDC which dramatically added to the vaccine schedule in the 1990 s but, by its own admission, failed to do the ninth grade algebra it would have taken to add up the cumulative mercury exposure kids were getting through the extra vaccines (source: internal email exchange originating at FDA). In internal emails, documents and meeting transcripts, CDC and FDA scientists and officials worry about potential liability and public reaction.

There is a further potential conflict-of-interest in that the CDC is responsible for promoting the nation s vaccine program and ensuring a high vaccination rate; therefore may not be able to credibly monitor and expose potential vaccine risks. The head of the CDC has acknowledged this potential conflict, which has been flagged by members of Congress, and has promised to address it. This issue was also addressed in a letter printed in the journal Pediatrics in December 2003 by Neal Halsey, et al. (referenced in the resource material below).

A reminder also that the CDC and IOM have not proven infallible. The IOM has had to reverse decisions it s made in the past (readers can see this 2003 news release announcing the IOM reversing its original finding that Agent Orange did not cause cancer:

<http://www4.nas.edu/news.nsf/6a3520dc2dbfc2ad85256ca8005c1381/c340a81e42> [4]). And one need only look so far as the rotavirus vaccine as to an example of a CDC judgment error when it comes to vaccines.

Stimola takes issue with the CBS report statement that a half dozen childhood vaccines still have mercury. According to the FDA, there are small amounts of mercury in the following vaccines which may be administered to children:

1. some DTaP vaccines (Tripedia)
2. some Hepatitis B vaccines (Engeriz B)
3. several DT vaccines
4. several Td vaccines
5. several TT vaccines
6. several Influenza vaccines
7. several Pneumococcal Polysaccharide vaccines.

Source: Food and Drug Administration

Therefore, the statement that a half dozen childhood vaccines still have mercury is accurate, if not understated. Ms. Stimola is clearly just plain wrong when she claims that that information is completely erroneous. And there are further confirmed anecdotes of mercury-containing Hepatitis B and other vaccines still being administered, though probably not in large numbers. This is referenced in the Office of Special Counsel report of June 2004 to Congress, cited further below under resources.

Ms. Stimola failed to address the fact that CDC will be reintroducing larger amounts of mercury into childhood vaccinations this fall through flu shots, which, according to the primary manufacturer Aventis Pasteur, contain 25 micrograms of mercury. The CDC is advising babies get two flu shots the first year, then one every year thereafter. Some mercury-free shots are available, but according to the CDC not enough to go around.

Ms. Stimola is also behind-the-curve when he attempts to state that the autism epidemic hasn t even been proven, and might simply be a result of more aggressive diagnoses. She seems to not be up on the latest CDC, American Academy of Pediatrics, and Health and Human Services literature on this topic from January 2004 Autism A.L.A.R.M. Again, readers may visit [www.medicalhomeinfo.org/screening/Autism%20downloads/AutismAlarm.pdf](http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org/screening/Autism%20downloads/AutismAlarm.pdf) [5] or simply search Autism ALARM on the Web to read the information firsthand outlining a true autism epidemic now affecting 1/166 children or, looking at broader related developmental disorders, 1/6 children. (source: CDC, American Academy of Pediatrics and HHS).

Stimola questions where the idea of children with a genetic susceptibility to autistic reactions to mercury comes from. This is a prevailing theory among prominent researchers (some of this is detailed in the resource information below), and genetic susceptibility to environmental mercury is well-documented and published. It s unclear why Ms. Stimola would consider a genetic

predisposition to an illness strange.

Stimola questions the application of a mouse study to humans; perhaps her one valid observation. Mice and humans are obviously not the same. Nobody in the CBS report claimed that they were. However, mouse studies are often used as a preliminary step in understanding human illnesses and cures, and this case is no different. It is unclear exactly how the mouse study applies to humans, but experts believe it merits important further study.

One has to wonder why some appear so fearful of the American public hearing all sides of a story that is so important, and would rather unfairly dismiss it as unsubstantiated hysterics. History is fraught with examples of medical mysteries that were unraveled not by the medical mainstream, but by patient experience and doctors and researchers willing to listen to them. For example, there are many recent cases of therapies that were deemed safe by federal health experts, only to be revealed as less than safe by patients who were harmed (i.e. Rezulin, Propulsid, Serzone, Baycol, Fen-phen, Lotronex, Thalidomide, Ephedra, to name a few that I have reported on personally).

Exposing this information in news reports does not imply vaccines should be stopped, that drugs are harmful, or any other such ridiculous inferences. Experts across the board agree that vaccines are one of the most important medical advances of our time. However, many of them believe not all vaccines are equal, and not all humans process them the same way. Many of them believe vaccines should be produced, used and administered in the safest way possible. If there is room for improvement, surely society and the medical profession should want to know, and should support research and improvements.

Sincerely,

Sharyl Attkisson

CBS News Investigative Correspondent

#### SELECTED RESEARCH AND RESOURCES:

The Congressional Record May 21, 2003: findings of a 3 year investigation of the claims regarding mercury in vaccines and autism (the entire record is sent as a pdf attachment). Excerpts:

"However, the Committee, upon a thorough review of the scientific literature and internal documents from government and industry, did find evidence that thimerosal did pose a risk. Thimerosal used as a preservative in vaccines is (sic) likely related to the autism epidemic. This epidemic in all probability may have been prevented or curtailed had the FDA not been asleep at the switch regarding the lack of safety data regarding injected thimerosal and the sharp rise of infant exposure to this known neurotoxin. Our public health agencies' failure to act is indicative of institutional malfeasance for self-protection and misplaced protectionism of the pharmaceutical industry."

Congressional Record. Vol 149;76; May 21, 2003; "In a July 2, 1999 e-mail, Dr. Ruth Etzel of the Department of Agriculture (formerly Of the Public Health Service) also noted the Public Health Service's resistance: 'We must follow the three basic rules: (1) act quickly to inform pediatricians that the products have more mercury than we realized; (2) be open with consumers about why we didn't catch this

earlier;(3) show contrition. As you know, the Public Health Service informed us yesterday that they were planning to conduct business as usual, and would probably indicate no preference for either product (mercury or mercury-free vaccines). While the Public Health Service may think that their 'product' is immunization, I think their 'product' is their recommendations.' "

Congressional Record. Vol 149;76; May 21, 2003; (page 8). July 2000  
Rep.Helen Chenoweth-Hage to Dr. Egan (FDA) "Just wait until it (thimerosal) gets in the courts. This case could dwarf the tobacco case. And we would expect you to do something now before that circus starts taking place. Denial is not proper right now...You know, if a jury were to look at this, the circumstantial evidence would be overwhelming. Let's do something before we see it in the courts."

Feb. 2000 draft of CDC/Verstraeten study which linked thimerosal exposure in vaccines to: autism, ADD, language and speech delays and the entire spectrum of neurodisorders.

May 20, 2004 the independent federal Office of Special Counsel Scott Bloch: Based on my limited review of the literature, there appears to be equally qualified experts on both sides ! In his letter to Congress: The disclosures allege that thimerosal/mercury is still present in childhood vaccines, contrary to statements made by HHS agencies, HHS Office of Investigations and the American Academy of Pediatrics. According to the information provided, vaccines containing 25 micrograms of mercury and carrying expiration dates of 2005 continue to be produced and administered !The disclosures also allege that the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration colluded with pharmaceutical companies ! in June 2000 to prevent the release of a study which showed a statistical correlation between thimerosal/mercury exposure through pediatric vaccines and neurological disorders, including autism, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, stuttering, tics, and speech and language delays. Instead of releasing the data ! Dr. Thomas Verstraeten later published a different version of the study in the November 2003 issue of Pediatrics (without disclosing that he had gone to work for a vaccine maker and no longer worked for the CDC while continuing to lead the CDC study) which did not show a statistical correlation !. I believe these allegations raise serious continuing concerns about the administration of the nation's vaccine program and the government's possibly inadequate response to the growing body of scientific research on the public health danger of mercury in vaccines.

Neal Halsey, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Institute for Vaccine Safety, former advisor to US vaccine program, American Academy of Pediatrics vaccine-policy expert: stated that government advisors never thought to add up the cumulative mercury kids were getting in shots as the CDC increased the vaccine schedule in the 1990 s. He was instrumental the recommendation for mercury to come out of childhood vaccines.

Haley, Daniel Salmon and Lawrence Moulton in Pediatrics Dec. 17, 2003 questioned the final version of the CDC/Verstraeten study, his exclusion of certain data, and recommended "greater independence in vaccine safety assessments" apart from "the highly successful program to promote immunizations." Questioned the fact that the final draft of the study excluded diagnoses not made by specialists, saying that "primary care physicians are capable of diagnosing "ADD without input from a subspecialist".

Halsey, Salmon and Moulton: AJPH 2004 "Enhancing Public Confidence in Vaccines through Independent Oversight of Post-Licensure Vaccine Safety."

Dr. Martha Herbert, Harvard pediatric neuroscientist, found the "new" form of autism, which differs from old-time cases obvious at birth, requires new investigation with "a knowledge of toxicology, genetic individuality, and biochemistry much more detailed than most current autism researchers possess."

Lyn Redwood, nurse (Sensible Action for Ending Mercury-Induced Neurological Disorders) and Sallie Bernard, market researcher, 2001 Journal of Medical Hypotheses, published study that detailed overlaps between symptoms of autism and mercury toxicity.

Mark Blaxill (S.A.F.E.M.I.N.D.), 2003 April Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, published paper outlining errors made in a study of public health experts who argued that the rise in autism could be accounted for by diagnostic substitution.

Amy Holmes, Louisiana physician, 2003 August International Journal of Toxicology study Analyzed mercury levels of autistic children's baby hair. Healthy children excreted eight times more mercury via hair than autistic children. The more severe the autistic symptoms, the less mercury was excreted in the hair indicating autistic children are retaining mercury in their tissue, possibly including the brain. Also examined maternal exposure to mercury through "Rho D" injections given certain Rh-negative women: half the autistic children's mothers had received such injections compared to 9% in the control group. Mothers with more mercury fillings also had much higher rate of autistic children.

Boyd Haley, Professor, Univ of Ky biochemist, PhD from Yale, discovered that Alzheimer's patients and autistics lack the kind of protein necessary for carrying mercury out of the body. They lack the ability to excrete mercury. Says that "no level of mercury can be considered a safe dose." Also provided possible explanation for why more boys have autism than girls; testosterone increased death rate of brain cells killed by thimerosal mercury; estrogen reduced the rate.

Richard Deth, Northeastern University pharmacologist, found that even low levels of thimerosal affect a crucial neural pathway regulating brain-cell growth; felt his research was crucial to bring forth any scientific evidence supporting connection between thimerosal exposure and autism.

Dr. Mark Geier, Geneticist, has conducted NIH research, formerly Johns Hopkins, study published in the peer-reviewed Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons concludes that there is an increase of neurodevelopment disorders following the use of Thimerosal containing vaccines. Also, found risk of autism in one CDC database sample many times higher in DTaP group that got thimerosal.

H. Vasken Aposhian, PhD, Professor of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Prof of Pharmacology, Univ of Arizona, Toxicologist, presented to IOM stating the link between thimerosal and neurodevelopmental disorders has become more plausible, appearing to add organic mercury to the mercury burden of children with an HG efflux disorder. Also discussed why epidemiological studies fail to prove cause and effect, and why pharmacokinetics in non-autistic children may not be applicable to autistic children.

Dr. Jeffrey Bradstreet MD FAAFP Director ICDRC Professor of Child Development Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine and Adjunct Professor Stetson University

David Geier

Dr. Jerold Kartzinel

James Adams, PhD, Chairman Dept of Materials & Engineering, Arizona State

Dr. Mark Geier, PhD

Case controlled study of Mercury Burden in Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: showed autistic children appear to lack an effective mercury efflux system.

Jeff Bradstreet

Dr. Leslie Ball, pediatrician at FDA

Dr. Robert Ball, FDA CBER Medical Officer

Concluded methylmercury exposure guidelines were good for reviewing exposure to ethylmercury and the amt of ethylmercury in children's vaccines exceeded EPA guidelines. Dr. Leslie Ball's emails showed there was internal resistance to her thought of removing thimerosal. She argued "On a strictly scientific basis, there are no data that have looked at the specific issue of thimerosal in vaccines. However, there are factors/data that would argue for the removal of thimerosal, including data on methylmercury exposure in infants and the knowledge that thimerosal is not an essential component to vaccines. In addition, the European community is moving to ban thimerosal.

Dr. Barry Rumack, FDA consultant, developed pharmacokinetic model to analyze amt of mercury infants were being exposed to (in 1999). FDA produced charts from this analysis showing most children in the 1990's received doses of ethylmercury in their vaccines that exceeded the EPA's limits (.1 mg/kg) for methylmercury for at least the first six months of their lives. Also that children exceeded FDA's less restrictive limits (.4 mg/kg) for at least the first two months of their lives.

Dr. Rashid Buttar DO, gave Congressional testimony at a hearing with the Government Reform & Oversight Hearing Subcommittee on Wellness & Human Rights, on his new treatment for autistic children that involves removing the mercury from their bodies. Many parents claim to see some improvement; this is considered experimental.

Dr. Mady Hornig, Columbia University, presented to IOM and published study regarding injecting genetically susceptible mice with thimerosal equivalent to childhood vaccine schedule of the 1990 s; they display symptoms and brain damage consistent with autism.

Dr. John Bernard, Director Nuclear Reactor Lab, MIT, research showing autistic children retain mercury.

Dr. Sudhir Gupta, Chief of Basic & Clinical Immunology, Dept of Medicine, UC Irvine and Dr. Joel Mason, Tufts University, Thimerosal Immune-Cell Tissue Culture Analyses

Dr. Jill James, University of Arkansas, Dr. S Sukumar, Johns Hopkins University  
Thimerosal Neuro-Tissue Culture, Mercury Biochemical Pathways Analyses in Autistic Children.

Dr. Walter Spitzer, McGill University Dept of Epidemiology, Epidemiology of Vaccines & Autism.

Dr. Andrew Wakefield, MB.BS., FRCS., FRCPATH Thoughtful House, Austin Tx and Director of Research ICDRC, Melbourne Fl., recently published MMR study in the Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons June 2004, the latest in a series examining the relationship between persistent measles virus infection and regressive autism; the second in a series of direct observations of Measles Virus (MV) persistence in children with Autistic Regression. All children had been vaccinated shortly prior to the development of autistic symptoms. While all of the controls had also been vaccinated - they were all negative for viral persistence. Taken together with the finding of MV in the intestinal tract of these and other children previously reported by Uhlmann, this represents evidence of active replication of virus and further indicates either failure of the vaccine to protect these children from natural infection or more likely, given the lack of any history of MV apart from the vaccine, this represent vaccine strain persistence.

Presently there is no proven intervention for viral persistence and it is the hope of the authors that these observations will stimulate additional research into the nature of the viral persistence and means of assisting the children in completely clearing the virus.

While MMR vaccine is generally considered safe, we propose a subset of genetically vulnerable children lack the ability to clear the vaccine strain of the virus and that this is - on the balance of the available biological data - a direct cause of their symptoms. We recognize the failure of epidemiology to validate these observations, and believe this specific hypothesis has never been adequately tested with any previous epidemiological study.

CBS EVENING NEWS transcript:

Because Alex Donnelly is autistic, he can't communicate normally.. or lead a normal life.  
Yet he has some amazing abilities.

WHAT'S THE CAPITAL OF TURKMINESTAN  
ASHKERBAD.

WHAT'S THE CAPITAL OF VENEZUELA ?  
CARACAS.

His Dad claims Alex wasn't autistic... until he got certain vaccinations containing a MERCURY preservative.

As kids got more and more vaccines over the years, more mercury came with them... in amounts way over safety limits. The CDC has long claimed it's NOT the cause of autism or related disorders... and while it's been phased out of almost all childhood vaccines in recent years, mercury is still in flu shots recommended for babies this fall. But now, a landmark study by Dr. Mady Hornig... funded by the anti-mercury group "SafeMinds" as well as the government... is adding to the mercury worries.

This strain of mice has genetic issues, like some children. Hornig injected them with mercury-laden vaccines equivalent to what kids got in the 1990's. The mice developed profound brain problems.

SHARYL: WHAT TYPES OF BEHAVIOR DID YOU SEE IN THE MICE, AND HOW DOES THAT COMPARE WITH WHAT WE CALL AUTISM?

DR. HORNIG: ALL SORTS OF STRANGE BEHAVIORS THAT WERE REPETITIVE IN NATURE, WHERE ANIMALS WOULD JUST KEEP REPEATING THE SAME BEHAVIOR IN A VERY STEREOTYPED FASHION.

It wasn't just repetition... the mice withdrew from their surroundings... like autistic children they resisted change... like autistic children... and developed brain abnormalities affecting emotion and thinking... like autistic children.

Alex's dad says it only confirms what he's believed all along: most kids aren't harmed by mercury in vaccines... they shed it naturally...but SOME retain it, and it poisons their brains.

JIM DONNELLY-FATHER OF AUTISTIC CHILD: WHEN HIS TESTING CAME BACK, HE HAD MERCURY LEVELS THAT WERE 20 TIMES THE EPA SAFETY MARGIN RESIDING IN HIS BODY. IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE.

Other scientists and the CDC dispute such a link. But if it's true... hundreds of thousands of American kids could be living with the fallout. And the results could be devastating to vaccine makers and federal health officials who have steadfastly defended the use of mercury, a potent neurotoxin, in childhood vaccines. Sharyl Attkisson, CBS News, Washington.

**ACSH RESPONDS (including input from Stimola, ACSH Medical and Executive Director Gilbert Ross, M.D., and ACSH Advisors Vincent Fulginiti, M.D., David Smith, M.D., and Donald A. Henderson, M.D., M.P.H.):**

The CBS news segment (hereafter "CBS") refers to mercury in "amounts way over safety limits" -- this is simply not true, as documented in many peer-reviewed scientific studies, in addition to government symposia.

It is not the CDC that asserts that mercury levels in children's vaccines are either absent or negligible -- it is based on published, large-scale, scientific studies (the Danish study, among many others), which demonstrate no causal relationship between vaccines and autism. The latest is in the last issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, which reports British experience demonstrating the same lack of causal relationship between vaccines, mercury, and autism.

CBS refers to a "landmark study" -- why does CBS characterize this as a landmark? The true landmark studies are in HUMANS, not mice. It is also funded by an anti-mercury group, as well as

other sources, which makes it suspect to start. Even if we ignore that, it is simply an animal study that does not equate to autism in humans by any stretch of the imagination -- except apparently at CBS News.

As pediatricians, we feel for any parents with an autistic child, but that does not mean that their opinion is scientific fact -- we all make assumptions about our children that are not borne out by fact. Alex's dad is quoted as anecdotal evidence for his belief that mercury is the cause of autism. That does not make it so! Indeed, if you polled each pediatrician in the United States, we daresay that 99.9% of them have had their children receive all of the recommended vaccines on schedule.

The Donnelly story -- that the mercury level was "20 times EPA's safety margin" -- where is that documentation? This is an unsubstantiated claim in the report that as listeners we cannot verify as to its accuracy or credibility.

CBS says "hundreds of thousands of kids" -- where did this number come from? This is an unnecessary and unsupported exaggeration.

This report is one-sided, making only slanting reference to the body of experimental data that demonstrate no causal link between vaccines and autism. The CBS report emphasizes one mouse study, several parental statements, and out-of-context quotes from other sources.

In CBS's response to Ms. Stimola's ACSH website article, CBS asserts: "There are no unsupported claims." But the parental assertions are totally unsupported. There is clear language that implies an association between mercury in vaccines and autism despite the overwhelming preponderance of evidence that there is not an association.

The research cited is but one report in animals -- it is neither "landmark" nor the latest -- the latest is in the NEJM.

CBS states that the Columbia report "builds on extensive published research" -- but looking over the list provided by CBS indicates reliance on Wakefield and other anti-mercury, anti-vaccine "investigators" (including a study by geneticist Mark Geier that the CDC has called controversial for various reasons). Wakefield's research, never accepted in the scientific/academic community, has been recently discredited, even by the magazine (the Lancet) that originally published it. The only "extensive" research indicates that there is no association.

Who are the "many prominent researchers" cited by the responder?

Studies have pointed out lack of a link -- Danish, U.S., and British studies all agree on the absence of a link.

Throughout, the author uses the logical fallacy that if you can't prove the lack of a link, that proves there might be or must be one. It is impossible to prove a negative. The fact is that the epidemiological studies do NOT demonstrate a link and demonstrate that increased recognition and reporting are responsible for the putative "epidemic" -- a point not recorded in the CBS report.

The diatribe against the CDC is inappropriate in the extreme and smacks of paranoid conspiracy theorists running the news. This agency has been above-board in identifying vaccine problems, changing public policy when facts, not fiction, call for reexamination of policy (there are many such

examples, the most recent being rotavirus vaccine withdrawal). The author does not understand the role of the CDC if she thinks it is only to advocate for vaccines -- the CDC and its advisory bodies also constantly examine and reexamine efficacy and safety of vaccines to ensure public health safety. The author appears to have a prejudice against the CDC. The Halsey correspondence is only partially cited; he responded to criticism and his message does not substantiate CBS's interpretation.

So, CDC, FDA, and IOM are not infallible -- this is no surprise -- who is? CBS? Remember who is responsible for two of the biggest science fiascos of recent times: the Alar scare of 1989 and silicone breast implants, thanks to Connie Chung in 1992: CBS!

CBS cites "thalidomide" among its accusations against the FDA and other bodies: but thanks to the professionalism and watchfulness of the FDA, thalidomide was NEVER approved or released in the USA.

Of course, there have been decisions that needed to be reevaluated and redrawn. That is the nature of science.

CBS misunderstands the AAP's Autism Alarm -- this simply is a recognition of increased diagnostic criteria, not an affirmation of an epidemic or of association with vaccine.

CBS's letter to ACSH notes an FDA list of vaccines with thimerosal traces but artfully leaves out the FDA site's accompanying statement that almost no vaccines contain the substance and that those that do have it in only trace amounts. See the original table here:

<http://www.fda.gov/cber/vaccine/thimerosal.htm> [6]

On a related note, the fact that FDA found more mercury in some vaccines than expected is not the same as saying that any harm actually occurred, nor is acknowledging mercury's potential, in high doses, to be a neurotoxin the same as saying it has been shown to cause autism.

CBS's letter also suggests that a vague reference to genetic predisposition for disease is sufficient information for viewers to draw appropriately dire conclusions -- Stimola's complaint was not that genetic flaws are impossible but that CBS never explains the details of their claim that there is a specific genetic condition predisposing people to be susceptibility to mercury. But CBS might have told us: What is this genetic link? How many people does it effect and how do their numbers compare to the numbers who might be harmed by the failure to continue vaccinations? Was an identifiable gene flaw found and by whom? Furthermore, does this briefly-mentioned sensitivity to mercury necessarily manifest itself as autism, or is that simply to be assumed?

Overall, the problem with the CBS report is reliance on one study and two anecdotal parental allegations. The author cites extensive research that was done for this report, but the report itself is biased, incomplete, and emphasizes one viewpoint, not an unbiased examination of all evidence. Of course one can gather "scientists" to assert that there is "controversy" about lung cancer and smoking, others who might say the Earth is flat. That does not make it so, and CBS News should know the difference. Whose interest was served by this "news" segment?

The report noted the potential for thimerosal cases to become as costly as tobacco cases, which would be tragic if it turned out to be true -- tobacco, after all, is a proven cause of cancer and other

diseases

The listener to this program would believe that vaccines cause autism, though in fact there is considerable evidence that they do not. It will scare parents away from getting children vaccinated and this may cost lives: there is no escaping that fact on CBS's part.

**June 29, 2004**

I didn't see the CBS program on autism and vaccinations, but Aubrey Stimola's report, their reply, and ACSH's reply in turn make for a depressing indictment of TV "Science" reporting. Attkisson, the CBS "science" reporter, demonstrates a frightful ignorance of scientific reasoning: she doesn't understand that correlation does not mean causation, that you can't prove a negative but you can demonstrate a negative with high probability, and that anecdotes and unsupported assertions have no place in developing scientific conclusions. The dumbing down of America continues apace, and CBS is making a substantial contribution.

Sadly,

Dr. Marvin J. "Chic" Schissel

ACSH Advisor

Roslyn Heights, NY

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[1] [http://www.acsh.org/publications/pubID.411/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.acsh.org/publications/pubID.411/pub_detail.asp)

[2] <http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/dynapage.taf?file=/mp/journal/vaop/ncurrent/abs/4001529a.html>

[3] [http://my.webmd.com/content/article/88/99936.htm?action=related\\_link](http://my.webmd.com/content/article/88/99936.htm?action=related_link)

[4] <http://www4.nas.edu/news.nsf/6a3520dc2dbfc2ad85256ca8005c1381/c340a81e42>

[5] <http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org/screening/Autism%20downloads/AutismAlarm.pdf>

[6] <http://www.fda.gov/cber/vaccine/thimerosal.htm>