

Re: February 8th release of a 1991 Merck & Co. memo

By ACSH Staff — February 24, 2005

On February 13, 2005, ACSH received a letter from the mother of an autistic child asking what our response was to the February 8th release of a 1991 Merck & Co. memo. The memo in question, written eight years before the FDA noted this fact in 1999, cited knowledge of the possibility that additions to the pediatric vaccine schedule resulted in overexposure of children to the ethylmercury based vaccine preservative, thimerosal. The dialogue below addresses whether ACSH's stance on the thimerosal-autism link has changed as a result of Merck's questionable actions on the matter and the contents of this memo.

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Date: February 13, 2005

Subject: What is your response to the recently released Merck & Co. memo on thimerosal?

Ms. Whelan,

I've read that you & your organization called the claim that vaccines cause autism one of the great unfounded health scares of 2004. Has your opinion changed any after the recent public release of the Merck & Co. memo that warned of dire consequences of putting mercury (thimerosal) in childhood vaccines, especially when adding the additional vaccines to the childhood immunization schedule in 1991?.

My son was born in 6/1991, three months after that memo was written, and he was given all the newly required immunizations that year and a flu shot. He was diagnosed in 2003 with Asperger's Syndrome and his world, and his family's world, has been significantly impacted ... not in a positive way. We demand the real answers. This seems eerily like the tobacco companies knowing early on about the link between tobacco and lung cancer but keeping it from the public for profit reasons. Merck and other drug companies appear guilty of the same behavior with relation to thimerosal and autism.

The drug companies need to be held accountable just as the tobacco companies finally were, no matter how much they helped fund any political election campaigns.

Sincerely,

Deborah Mason

Dear Ms. Mason,

I am writing in response to the letter you sent to Dr. Whelan regarding ACSH's thoughts on the recently released 1991 Merck memo about thimerosal safety.

Let me first say that I sympathize with your demand for answers as to why this happened to your son, what is to blame, and who, if anyone, can and should be held accountable for the earth shattering impact conditions along the autism spectrum have on the sufferers themselves and on their families. Please know that ACSH seeks these answers too.

I want to clarify that ACSH's stance regarding thimerosal and its relationship to autism--namely that there is no evidence of a causal relationship--is not an opinion, but a scientific conclusion drawn from a careful analysis of the available data. This conclusion is in keeping with that of the overwhelming majority of reputable pediatricians, epidemiologists, neurologists, geneticists, immunologists and risk specialists, none of whom are in the business of opining on safety issues. The fact is, the large body of peer reviewed studies does NOT support a link between thimerosal and the development of autism. This is not to be confused, as it often is, with the FDA's 1999 decision to begin removing thimerosal from pediatric vaccines, though that action understandably inspires people to ask "well then why did the FDA...?" The FDA took this action because they realized--admittedly after the fact--that by adding to the pediatric immunization schedule they had inadvertently exceeded the limits for mercury exposure set by the EPA to protect against the well known neurotoxic effects of mercury at high doses, effects that are not in anyway related to autism. It is these excessive doses of mercury that the recently-made-public Merck memo acknowledged eight years earlier in 1991, while also pointing out that the recommended daily values for infants--which were indeed exceeded by eighty-seven times after extrapolations were calculated from studies of methylmercury, a compound about ten times more toxic and with different biochemical effects than ethylmercury, the compound found in thimerosal.

Of course, media representations of the Merck memo would have you believe that it made specific reference to proof of harm in the form of direct evidence of a link between thimerosal and autism. Based on the headlines and the quotes taken out of context (i.e., "viewed in this way [based on standards from a 1977 study of methylmercury] the mercury load appears rather large"), it makes good sense that parents would be up in arms over what has been portrayed as an industry cover-up at the expense of their children's health and well-being, and a situation seemingly analogous, as you point out, to the notorious profit-seeking deceptions of the tobacco industry. This is simply not the case-but it makes great news.

I would like to encourage you to read, if you haven't already, the Merck memo that has been misleadingly touted in the media as proof not only that thimerosal is dangerous, but that this was known and suppressed for eight years so Merck could protect itself from litigation. In actual fact, the memo (which I have attached for you at the end of this letter) makes no mention of autism (which again has NOT been scientifically linked to thimerosal). Additionally, the memo does not come to the conclusion, as the media unfairly leads worried parents to believe, that the dose of thimerosal received by children constituted a safety hazard. In fact, the memo finds NO evidence

of harm, indicating with research citations that the daily allowance of mercury may be well below the actual safety threshold and that studies should be done to reestablish this daily allowance's validity, with adjustments made accordingly.

Interestingly, despite researchers having found no evidence of harm, the memo recommends action be taken to remove thimerosal from vaccines, based on what is known as "public perception of harm," a phenomenon Merck acknowledges is not based on scientific evidence but instead on widely held public opinion--which is often fueled and capitalized on by the media as they compete for ratings. I have to say, the fact that public perception of a non-existent health risk can influence science, regardless of actual evidence, should be most alarming to us.

Another point of interest: Merck made clear that the "perception" of danger might lead people NOT to have their children vaccinated, a decision that carries far more risk to a child's health than thimerosal. Remember the devastation caused by polio and other such illnesses? Perhaps this is why we have seen a resurgence of whooping cough--a potentially deadly vaccine-preventable disease--in the past years.

Lastly, the longer we focus our valuable attention and resources on thimerosal alone, particularly after the large majority of researchers have denounced the hypothesis, the further we drift from discovering the reason behind the apparent surge in autism cases.

I hope these scientific arguments will not be taken as a dismissal of this crucial issue, and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional questions.

All the best,

Aubrey Stimola
ACSH

P.S. with your permission, I would like to repost our correspondence on the ACSH web log, given the interest in the topic. Please let me know if you are not amenable to this idea.

Ms. Stimola:

Thank you for the response and for attaching the Merck memo.

I have also read of many reputable scientists (Dr. Battar, Dr. Deth, etc) who claim there is a definite link between thimerosal-laced vaccines and autism related disabilities. I know my children's pediatrician is very defensive on the topic ... but of course he would be, because drs. don't want to be tied liability-wise to any of this.

I agree that the only focus shouldn't be on vaccines/flu shots related to autism, ADD, etc... as there are other environmental threats (mercury/aluminum related) that could add into the equation as well ... power plant emissions, tuna, amalgamated dental fillings, mercury laced paints (in the 80's), computer parts, etc., etc. But the fact that the autism explosion has occurred right after more thimerosal-laced vaccines were added to the childhood immunization schedule in 1991 (without appropriate testing being done by the CDC to see what effect that added amount of mercury would have on an infant's developing brain) is very telling, in my opinion.

Of course, not every child getting vaccines in the 1990's was harmed, because it seems, from my research, that there probably is a genetic factor somehow in play (perhaps related to autoimmunity) that makes some children more vulnerable to being negatively impacted by environmental assaults (including thimerosal) than others.

I feel that there is no justification for thimerosal-laced vaccines to be eliminated from the list of environmental threats that are to be considered as possible reasons for the heartbreaking autism related disabilities explosion since the last decade. A lot of powerful people who work for companies who have a great liability potential related to this issue are trying to convince us otherwise. If they had children / grand children who had been effected, their viewpoint would change, I believe.

If you want to use our correspondence on your web log, I would prefer it being done only if my email address is not included, for privacy purposes.

Thank you.

Deborah Mason

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