The rate of diagnosed autism in the country today has increased from 1 in 10,000 in 1995 to 1 in 150 today. However, this likely reflects increased information and awareness about autism, the expansion of diagnostic criteria, more thorough and accurate diagnoses, and the classification of many cases as autism that would previously have been recorded as mental retardation. Autism is a lifelong condition that has a devastating effect on individuals and on their families. It is understandable that those involved with the autism spectrum can be desperate for help, for any hope of help. And this desperation makes them ready prey for charlatans.

There are therapies, ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis) and CBT (Cognitive, Behavior Therapy), that are considered helpful. But they are not widely available, can be expensive and time consuming, and may offer only limited progress. This sets the stage for sham artists who eagerly hurl themselves into the breach with information and treatment that is false, ineffective and harmful.

The false assertion that connects autism with vaccines and mercury has led to lower vaccination rates and a marked increase in those major diseases that vaccination protected against; should the trend continue we may be faced with an epidemic. But promoters of this deceit are cashing in with books, lectures, and, worst of all, scientifically unsupported treatments that are not only ineffective but can be dangerous. Such treatments include chelation, hyperbaric oxygen, lupron, and a wide variety of other questionable therapies, diets, and ineffective behavioral regimens.

The vaccine quackery started in 1998 with a published paper by Andrew Wakefield and twelve others that suggested a link with MMR vaccine and autism. This study was criticized as flawed and ten of its twelve authors have since disassociated themselves from its assertions. Subsequently it was revealed that previous to the study Wakefield had received well over a half million dollars from lawyers hoping to sue vaccine companies. Recently it was claimed that Wakefield falsified his data. Worse yet, it has been discovered that Wakefield, prior to his publication, had applied for a patent for a new measles vaccine: if he could prove the old vaccine was dangerous a new vaccine would be very profitable. But the bottom line is that with all the studies that have been done worldwide involving over half a million children, no association between autism and vaccines has ever been demonstrated, and this counterfeit controversy has been scientifically laid to rest. Unfortunately, this phony issue still rages among the scientifically ignorant public.

In the news recently have been the activities of Dr. Mark Geier and his son David, longtime campaigners in the arena of dubious autism activity. Mark Geier has appeared as an "expert" witness in over a hundred cases, although he has been criticized by courts for being intellectually dishonest and not having appropriate training, expertise and experience. Reputable scientists have repeatedly dismissed the Geiers’ autism research as seriously flawed. A front-page article in
the NY Times actually made fun of the pretentions of the Geiers and their naive lab facilities. But they are not deterred by criticism, and their latest venture is opening clinics around the country offering autism treatment with the dangerous drug Lupron. Lupron alters levels of testosterone and is sometimes used to chemically castrate sex offenders; no scientific support exists for it to treat autism. To use it for autism has been called irresponsible.

Wakefield and the Geiers are by no means the only offenders in the autism world. They are just two examples of the probably thousands of impostors exploiting the desperation of the autism community. The only solution will be a better understanding on the part of the public of the principles of science, and a much clear-cut and louder noise made by the legitimate scientific community.

Dr. Marvin J. Schissel is a dentist and an advisor to the American Council on Science and Health, the National Council Against Health Fraud, and the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and has a son with autism.