

Autism Debate Heats Up As New Studies Question Conventional Assumptions

1. © By Peter Barry Chowka <http://www.naturalhealthvillage.com/>
(May 1, 2005) Autism is a severe developmental disorder. In recent years its incidence has increased dramatically, perhaps by ten-fold or more. Autism is defined as "a characterized by impairments in social relating, language, and by the presence of repetitive and stereotyped behaviors." Autism is not the same thing as mental retardation, since people with autism can have high IQs. A particularly disturbing description of autism is one by Walter Spitzer, MD, a leading Canadian epidemiologist: in its most severe cases, he wrote in an in the in 2001, an autistic person is "a dead soul in a live body."

The possible link between environmental toxins, especially mercury (an ingredient in vaccinations as well as a toxic byproduct of many industrial processes), and autism has been debated for years with the medical Establishment generally dismissing any association. For example, in May 2004 a book-length issued by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (NAS), an extremely influential quasi-federal government policy research group in Washington, D.C., dismissed a causal link between and . As an NAS release issued on May 18, 2004 noted, "Based on a thorough review of clinical and epidemiological studies [by the thirteen-member Immunization Safety Review Committee of scientific and medical academics and professionals], neither the mercury-based vaccine preservative thimerosal nor the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine are associated with autism."

In response, Barbara Loe Fisher, president of the , was quoted as saying that she was "stunned" by the committee recommendation that researchers discontinue active study of vaccines and autism and instead examine possible genetic factors in mercury metabolism. "They're saying that the case is closed," Fisher said. According to , she suggested that the panel was acting to protect large government research grants at their home universities. "This is extremely political, not scientific," she added.

Now, the debate is heating up again in light of a new epidemiological study by researchers at the University of Texas Health Science Center that went online on February 17, 2005 in the journal . The new study asserts that there evidence of a link between mercury exposure and autism. The study is titled "Environmental mercury release, special education rates, and autism disorder: an ecological study of Texas." A pdf version of it is online and an html version at .

The UT study is the first one to examine the relationship between chronic, low-dose exposure to mercury and autism. The data came from 254 counties and 1,200 school districts in Texas, and compared mercury emission levels during the year 2001 with rates of autism and special education services. As an article about the study published in the reported, "Studying individual school districts in Texas, the epidemiologists found that those districts with the highest levels of mercury in the

environment also had the highest rates of special education students and autism diagnoses." Raymond F. Palmer, an associate professor in the UT-San Antonio's department of family and community medicine and the study's lead author, "This is a preliminary study that needs further study but suggests there is a link. If corroborated, it would have pretty severe implications for policy." In another , Palmer said, "We found that for every 1,000 pounds of mercury released by industry, there was a 17% increase in autism. This is one of the most highly toxic [substances] on earth. So when we talk about 50 pounds, 1,000 pounds, 2,000 pounds released into the environment, this is a tremendous amount of potential exposure."

On April 21, 2005, a study published in the peer-reviewed journal advanced the debate. The study, "Comparison of Blood and Brain Mercury Levels in Infant Monkeys Exposed to Methylmercury or Vaccines Containing Thimerosal," suggests that thimerosal and methylmercury react differently in the brains of infants and that methylmercury is therefore not a suitable reference for assessing the risk of exposure to mercury in vaccines that use thimerosal. This new distinction is not just academic. As one news account about the study explained, "A mercury-laced preservative once widely added to pediatric vaccines exposes infants' brains to twice the neurotoxin previously suspected, offering evidence that health guidelines may underestimate the risk newborns face, researchers say in a [new] report." A news release about the study is online and both an abstract and the text of the entire study can be downloaded free in pdf format from .

In the popular press, on April 19, 2005, in a feature article , United Press International writer Dan Olmsted described "trying to find autistic Amish people here in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country." Statistically, he writes, "there should be dozens of them -- if autism occurs at the same prevalence as the rest of the United States. So far, there is evidence of only three, all of them children, the oldest age 9 or 10." A minority of Amish parents vaccinate their children, due to religious reasons. Olmsted's admittedly nonscientific review concluded that all three of the Amish children with autism that he located had been vaccinated. He quotes Stacey-jean Inion, an Amish-Mennonite woman who is the mother of an autistic child adopted from China where she was vaccinated, saying "Everywhere I go (outside the Amish community) I find children who are autistic, just because I have an autistic daughter -- in the grocery store, in the park, wherever I go. In the Amish community, I simply don't find that."

On May 26-29, 2005, a major conference, , will take place in Chicago with more than 100 experts in the field representing a comprehensive view of the subject. According to group founder Edmund Arranga, Autism One is "a non-profit, charity organization, started by a small group of parents of children with autism" and the annual national conference is "for parents and professionals for the care, treatment, and recovery of children with autism." At Autism One's Web site, from the 2004 conference are available for free download. The 2005 conference's by David Kirby, author of , is free and open to the public. Kirby's book, a hot seller online at and elsewhere, is a serious indictment of conventional medical thinking about the safety of mercury in vaccines re: the epidemic of autism.

In an interesting and illuminating aside, according to an [article](#) published April 21, 2005 in [The New York Times](#), a legal newsletter Kirby (who, in addition to having written for the [New York Times](#) is described as a former assistant to New York City Democratic Party officials) has alleged that "the right wing press has been all over this [favorably publicizing [the mercury/autism link](#)], and the left wing press won't touch it."

"NPR [National Public Radio] and the Public Broadcasting System get a lot of money from drug companies," Kirby told. "And they need whatever money they can get, so they are not going to offend any advertiser – ever. Whereas the major commercial networks have a little more leeway and play. They take more risks. The conservative press is anti-government, whereas the liberal press is so pro-public health – it is like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) can do no wrong, doctors can do no wrong. It's like – the liberal Democratic Party establishment created this public health system that we are so proud of, and we are not going to attack it. On the left, support of government public health programs trumps hatred of drug companies," Kirby said. "And the right is a little more divided. You have the pro-business right – the Bill Frist and the editorial side – who are defending the drug companies at all costs. And then you have the real anti-government and anti-bureaucracy types who fear and distrust government and think this [the mercury/autism link] is entirely plausible."

Kirby told [me](#) that he has been interviewed by several local NPR affiliates, but that "the national NPR has ignored this book, hung up on me, written me back and told me to take them off my mailing list. Never in 15 years as a journalist have I ever been treated like this by anybody – except for the CDC."

Medicine, Inc. Continues to Disprove Itself

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(May 1, 2005) For many years, it has been my observation that conventional allopathic medicine has largely disproven itself, as reflected in a steady and growing output of studies and reports published in both the mainstream scientific and medical literature and in the [New York Times](#). Examples include [questioning the outcome of the much hyped War on Cancer](#), highly annotated reports contending that "American [conventional] medicine does more harm than good" (a Microsoft Word document on this topic can be downloaded [here](#)), and recent news accounts of the [collapse of the market of and highly profitable, but dangerous, prescription drugs](#).

Several noteworthy articles that further advance this point of view and related themes have recently appeared.

The one that will likely have the largest number of readers was published in the mainstream popular press. The May 2005 issue of [The New York Times](#) includes a six-page article by investigative reporter Mary A. Fischer, "When Bad Medicine Happens to Good People. (A pdf of the article can be accessed [here](#).) Fischer's article highlights several compelling stories of people who were harmed by medical mistakes. According to an [Institute of Medicine 1999](#) report, such errors account for the unnecessary deaths of as many as 100,000 Americans annually and harm to many times that number of people.

In the scientific literature, the March 2005 issue of the ([1](#)) includes an article "Assessing Demoralization and Depression in the Setting of Medical Disease" by researchers in Italy and the United States. The purpose of the study was to assess the presence of demoralization and major depression in the setting (hospitals and treatment centers) of medical disease. Demoralization was determined to be present in 30.4 percent of patients studied and depression in 16.7 percent, with some overlap. "The findings," the authors write, "suggest a high prevalence of demoralization in the medically ill." They note, "Demoralization is frequent across different medical settings. . . Depressive symptoms are also frequently encountered in the medically ill."

The authors advocate further research. "A first, important research question is whether the presence of demoralization in conjunction with a medical disorder has prognostic implications (disease outcome, adverse health behaviors, lack of adherence, physical symptom perception, functional impairment, and medical utilization). . . The giving-up complex may affect vulnerability to disease. . . A second important line of research is concerned with treatment of demoralization and the effects of such treatment on the associated medical illness."

This study's confirmation that a high percentage of (not psychiatric) patients are demoralized and depressed should come as little surprise. When I began covering alternative and conventional medicine at the grassroots level of clinical practice in the 1970s, one of the things that stood out was the profound difference in the attitudes of patients at conventional vs. alternative treatment centers (respectively, downbeat and depressed vs. optimistic and hopeful). There were exceptions, of course, but the memory of this observation is one that is inescapable for anyone who has objectively reported on conventional and alternative medicine.

A [2](#) with certain parallels to the one on demoralization, in the February 2005 issue of (*Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 2005;74:100-107 DOI: 10.1159/000083168), examined the psychological and psychosomatic distress associated with cancer. The conclusion: "Psycho-oncology literature has shown that 30-50% of cancer patients meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis."

In a development that seems somewhat analogous, a study by researchers at the (UK) that will be published on May 18, 2005 in the [3](#) is titled [4](#) It suggests, according to a [5](#), "that a happy state of mind can lead to a healthier heart and lower levels of stress-inducing chemicals" including cortisol.

According to the [6](#), Professor Andrew Steptoe of the UCL's Department of Epidemiology, the lead author of the study, said: "It has been suspected for the last few years that happier people may be healthier, both mentally and physically, than less happy people. What this study shows is that there are plausible biological pathways linking happiness with health. Cortisol has effects on a number of bodily systems related to health, so the lower levels that we have recorded during people's everyday lives are potentially important. Fibrinogen is a substance that is directly related to risk of coronary heart disease, and the finding that happier individuals have lower fibrinogen responses to stress suggest that this could be a mediating

mechanism. What we find particularly interesting is that the associations between happiness and biological responses were independent of psychological distress. We already know that depression and anxiety are related to increased physical health risk. This study raises the intriguing possibility that the effect of happiness may be somewhat separate."

The subject of CNN's (Cable News Network) weekly, half-hour health program, , on April 24, 2005 (8:30 to 9:00 am E.D.T.) was ", from Herbs and Exercise [sic] to Acupuncture and Spices."

The rather cursory look at alt med that the program presented was generally positive in a typically breezy and insubstantial way. Not surprisingly, it suggested that alternative approaches are most credible when they are "integrated" (with conventional medicine) and should only be used carefully and with the oversight of licensed medical doctors. For example, near the start of the program, Gupta said, "Vitamins and herbs are one of the fastest growing forms of alternative medicines. Listen to this. Sales jumped nearly 400 percent between 1980 and 1997. But supplements are not for everyone. Be especially careful if you're currently taking prescription medications, are pregnant or breast feeding, or if you're having an operation soon. Another concern, if you're younger than 18 or over 65, you may react differently to some of those supplements."

The interview guest on the April 24th edition of was , medical director of Carolinas Integrative Health. Like Gupta, Greenfield sounded an ongoing cautionary note. Greenfield: "Now we have to apply a careful microscope to the use of vitamins and supplements, much as we would for the use of drugs and pharmaceutical agents." Gupta replied: "This is where it seems to get a little tricky, Dr. Greenfield, because people think [that if] it's over the counter, it's natural, it's herbal, it's safe." Greenfield: "And Dr. Gupta, you're absolutely right. And one of the things our listeners need to understand is what is natural is not necessarily the same as what is safe. . .But the key here, as was stated earlier, work with a well-trained practitioner who can guide you in this regard with regards to safety first and then effectiveness." In an article about Andrew Weil, M.D. and integrative medicine in the (January 20, 2004), which tries to give Weil exclusive credit for the growth of alternative and complementary medicine in the United States in recent decades, Greenfield, who spent two years in the late 1990s as a fellow in Weil's integrative medicine program at the University of Arizona, insisted, "We are not 'alternative' medicine. That implies we do these therapies instead of conventional care. Not true."

At one point, , a telegenic hyperachiever who was an advisor to First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton when he worked for the Clinton Administration as a White House Fellow in the 1990s, asked Greenfield if he had ever had acupuncture and "Does it hurt?" At that point, I thought I had time traveled back to 1972 when acupuncture was mentioned for the first time in the mainstream American media. In February 1972, famous journalist James Reston had acupuncture in a Chinese hospital when he underwent an emergency appendectomy. Reston was in China as part of the press contingent covering President Richard Nixon's groundbreaking first visit to China and Reston's subsequent articles about acupuncture in the helped to expose Americans to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

The reported on April 11 that Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, of Leicester University in the UK, the "pioneer of DNA fingerprinting," said in a speech that, to quote the article, "Everyone in the world should have their genetic profile stored on a database." The same day, in another , the reported that "Doctors will be asked to check their patients' diets more closely to ensure that mixing their medication and the food they eat does not result in life-threatening cocktails. Government safety advisers are concerned that powerful drugs, already toxic by their very nature, may be made even more dangerous by interacting with ingredients in foods, drinks and supplements. Alternatively, patients may unwittingly undermine the effectiveness of their medical treatments by eating the wrong foods. Many patients may be taking up to 10 medicines at a time, officials say, meaning that the 'potential for interaction in some individuals is great.'"

In fact, much of the momentum for monitoring, identifying, numbering, and data basing the most private information about every individual on the planet is coming from representatives of the medical Establishment (a.k.a. the medical industrial complex) - who cite purported benefits to public health because of such Orwellian undertakings. The of (March 28, 2005) rhapsodized about the emergence of the "digital hospital . . . providing a glimpse into the potential of information technology to transform the health-care industry." On April 1, 2005, physicians and researchers from several leading U.S. medical schools proposed in an that "It Is Time to Implement Routine, Not Risk-Based, HIV Testing." Published in the journal , the editorial insisted that "primary care providers should make HIV testing a routine component of health care" for "any person who is sexually active." Currently, the official recommendation is to test only "at risk" individuals for HIV, the virus reported to cause AIDS. The ultimate objective, of course, is for conventional medicine to treat any person who tests positive for HIV antibodies with prescription drugs. This push for mandatory testing is gaining adherents. In the February 10, 2005 issue of the , two articles and an editorial advocate routine screening for everyone for HIV. One of the articles , " The cost-effectiveness of routine HIV screening in health care settings, even in relatively low-prevalence populations, is similar to that of commonly accepted interventions, and such programs should be expanded." The editorial recommends mass screening, noting " these studies [also published in the February 10th issue] indicate that the benefits of screening extend to society generally."