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Vaccine exemption outrages mercury foes

By **MAGGIE BORMAN**

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Reaction has been swift to a decision this month by the Illinois Department of Public Health to delay state lawmakers' attempts to reduce mercury exposure for those receiving flu shots.

The controversy surrounds a decision by state director Dr. Eric Whitaker to issue an exemption to a law that was supposed to take effect Jan. 1, eventually banning mercury content in certain vaccines. The law, however, contains a provision that allows for an exemption if the state determines that the law would lead to, among other things, vaccine shortages. Whitaker has said the phase-out could cause shortages of this season's flu shot and vaccines for diphtheria, tetanus, meningitis and Japanese encephalitis.

Illinois' Mercury-Free Vaccine Act was signed into law by Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Aug. 29, reducing the allowable mercury content in all vaccines to 1.25 micrograms after Jan. 1, 2006, and for all vaccines administered in Illinois to be totally mercury-free by Jan. 1, 2008. The vaccine preservative thimerosal is comprised of 49.6 percent mercury by weight and is a known neurotoxin.

Illinois Vaccine Awareness Coalition President Barbara Mullarkey ridiculed Whitaker's decision in a recent press release, calling him "an unelected state bureaucrat."

House Bill 511's primary sponsor, state Rep. Kurt Granberg, D-Centralia, introduced the bill because of concerns about the possible link between thimerosal and autism spectrum disorders that have risen in prevalence from 1 in 10,000 in 1990 to 1 in 166 today.

In May 2003 a congressional investigation led by U.S. Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., concluded that mercury was the likely cause of the meteoric rise in neurodevelopment disorders, according to Dr. David Ayoub of the Prairie Collaborative for Immunization Safety in Springfield, Ill.

Numerous research studies have since confirmed the relationship, and there are widespread reports of successful treatments of autism by measures directed at removing retained mercury from victims and repairing its metabolic damage. In addition, autism rates in some states have started dropping after mercury was removed from several routine vaccines after 1999.

The Illinois bill would most noticeably affect infants and pregnant women getting a mercury-containing flu vaccine, Ayoub said, noting that adults receiving the flu shot today are exposed to 25 micrograms of mercury, or 3.5 times greater than what the Environmental Protection Agency considers safe.

Flu shots for infants will surpass EPA limits by 11 to 16 times and when an expectant mother is immunized the second trimester fetus will be overdosed by a factor of 250, Ayoub said.

The bill easily passed the Senate (56-0) and the House (135-1) on May 29, leaving ample time for the Department of Public Health to comply with the law and to notify vaccine providers. However, authorities at pharmacies, hospitals and clinics throughout Illinois were never made aware of the legislation.

"I am disappointed that we've flipped the safety valve of the exemption in the first year," Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, one of HB 511's co-sponsors, said. "There was clearly a breakdown in communication between IDPH and the medical community and the pharmaceutical companies, and we'll have to determine whether that breakdown can be remedied legislatively."

The department of health immunization division said details of implementation were not specified in the language of the bill, adding that "notification of vaccine providers was not our duty."

According to Ayoub and Mullarkey, the minutes of a June 29, 2005, meeting of the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which involved Department of Public Health employees, reveals that an exemption of Illinois' Mercury-Free Vaccine Act was planned two months before Blagojevich even signed it into law.

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The Illinois Vaccine Awareness Coalition says the pediatric group claims credit for a clause in House Bill 511 allowing the health department to bypass the law in the event of a disease outbreak, vaccine supply shortage or an economic emergency, particularly if the health department could not fund the \$2 per vaccine added cost for mercury-free vaccines. In addition, the state also blocked a provision requiring doctors distribute information about thimerosal to patients informing them that vaccines contain mercury.

"Their inaction coupled with premeditated plans to file an exemption back in June is indicative of incompetence if not malfeasance," Ayoub said.

The Illinois Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics took a seemingly opposite position from its national chapter which, along with the Center for Disease Control and Public Health Service, disseminated an urgent statement in 1999 claiming that thimerosal should be removed from childhood vaccines "as soon as possible."

Those objecting to the Illinois Department of Health's exemption said that Whitaker ignored the fact that safer, mercury-free flu vaccines for children are available, or that any discarded vaccine with thimerosal is considered hazardous waste and has to be carefully disposed.

"It appears that the Illinois Department of Public Health has an alternative disposal -- directly into the arms of its citizens," Ayoub said.

The \$2 cost for a safer vaccine seems reasonable, Ayoub said, when you consider the enormous burden Illinois taxpayers shoulder covering special education costs for the exploding rates of a variety of neurodevelopment disorders, including autism.

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