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Heavy price to pay for the spin on vaccinations

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THE furore over the MMR vaccine and its putative association with autism, which "trampled a ... destructive path through the fields of childhood vaccination policy" (British Medical Journal, 27th March, 2004) is likely to be swamped into insignificance by a burgeoning new vaccine row.

The evidence linking autism to the toxic heavy metal, mercury, is strong and growing. Thiomersal, a compound containing almost 50% mercury, has been used for 66 years as a preservative in vaccines. Since then, serious, incurable, behavioural disorders such as autism and hyperactivity-attention-deficit-disorder (HADD), rare or non-existent prior to 1939, have been increasing exponentially. A parallel increase does not of itself indicate cause, but there are many factors that increasingly support that conclusion.

As long ago as 1999, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) found that accumulated mercury in infants under 6 months, mainly from vaccines, exceeded safety limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency. Researchers then reported a statistically significant, epidemiological association between thiomersal-containing vaccines and childhood neuro-developmental disorders - a biologically plausible link. Alarm bells rang around the world. Medicine regulators in America and Europe promptly recommended the phasing out of thiomersal in vaccines for infants and toddlers, "in the shortest possible time frame".

Some 14 months later, in August 2000, an announcement in the UK that all new vaccines would be thiomersal-free was clearly window-dressing. In fact, the mercury-containing DTP triple vaccine (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) continued to be used, simply to use up existing stocks. This was the first vaccine infants received, in 3 doses at monthly intervals, the first at 2 months of age. It was phased out eventually in mid 2004, and as usual the introduction of a replacement vaccine was turbulent.

The health authorities had stood up to a man and brazenly declared the old mercury injections safe. No evidence proves the link between autism and thiomersal, they said. They even claimed the new injection was free of thiomersal for other reasons (it would interfere with the polio component of the new jab). They unwisely urged parents and GPs to continue to use the old vaccine even when the new one was only a month or two away, on the grounds that children would otherwise be at risk from the three diseases. An outbreak of whooping cough or diphtheria in the UK? When did anyone last see a case?

Meanwhile, although a House of Commons Health Committee recommended in 1997 an urgent gathering of information and monitoring of autism, the Department of Health has done nothing so far. But health authorities have painted themselves into a corner with misinformation, because if the link between mercury and autism is proved beyond all doubt - which the accumulating evidence suggests it will be - the capacity for litigation, certainly in the US, would possibly be sufficiently seismic to destroy the pharmaceutical industry as we know it.

Mercury has been known to be poisonous for decades, but like many toxins, it can be tolerated by adults in minuscule doses. But the same is emphatically not true of infants. 25 per cent of American children have excessive heavy metal exposure early in life, even prenatally from the mother's dental amalgam fillings and environmental pollution, as well as from vaccines.

The infant blood-brain barrier is not fully developed until about 6 months old. The developing brain is particularly susceptible to tiny amounts of toxic metals, which disrupt chemical messages and alter essential transmitters such as serotonin. Mercury used as an antiseptic in teething powder in the 1940s caused a condition known as "pink disease" with skin inflammation and behavioural problems similar to autism. The metal was removed from teething powder and pink disease disappeared from the medical textbooks. How appalling that the metal continued to be used for vaccines, at the most vulnerable time of life.

Autism in the UK increased tenfold among children between 1984 and 1994. In the US, the increase over the last two decades is about sixty-fold. One child in 166 is autistic, the third most common childhood complaint.

The current most plausible theories, in which there is a consensus of several groups of researchers from Scandinavia and the US, is that the cause is multifactorial. The first factor is a genetic predisposition, for only some

children appear to be at risk from heavy metals. They lack a protein called metallothionein which detoxifies and protects against heavy metals. In these children, the toxicity of the mercury on brain, gut and immune system is unopposed; and it is proposed the MMR can then act as a trigger to precipitate autism. MMR does not contain mercury, but it does consist of live viruses, which a damaged immune system cannot handle.

Thiomersal is no longer present in infants' vaccines in the UK. But parents and politician-watchers do not forget past spin, and are all too aware of outsize conflicts of interest in the establishment. The new infant pentavalent vaccine contains other toxins, aluminium and formaldehyde, with long-term effects unknown.

The thinking public is mystified at the urgency with which they are pressed to accept vaccination, when the diseases these medicines are designed to defy are virtually banished from the world. In the days when vaccines were designed to protect against rampant and potentially fatal disease like smallpox and polio, they were indeed an unqualified good. Now, it is difficult for even professionals to be sure.

If I were a new parent today, I would be reluctant to accept the present received wisdom on vaccination.

- Margaret Cook is a retired consultant.

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