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Conference to raise autism awareness

By Silvia Casabianca

After an hour or more in the garden, Tim comes in for a snack. He pulls his father to where the cereal is and shows him what he wants. A casual observer listening to the sounds he makes might think that Tim is crying, but he isn't.

Tim suffers from an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). His parents believe the onset coincided with his second influenza shot.

The term ASD refers to a whole range of symptoms in their varying degrees and describes those mildly affected to the most profound disability. Autism, Asperger Syndrome, ADD and ADHD are subgroups of the Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

ASD, also known simply as autism, has three central symptoms: impairments in imagination, social communication and social interaction, plus a strong tendency towards repetitive behavior, sometimes unusual behavior. Most, if not all people suffering from autism have also some impairment in at least one of their senses, from too sensitive to under sensitive.

Nutritionist Carol Simontacchi said this disorder challenges every aspect of the child's metabolism in a way rarely seen in other syndromes. "They present alterations of the intestinal flora, leaky gut, allergy problems, decrease of enzymes, and detox paths are limited," she said.

Simontacchi created an autism support group in Fort Myers, and has been networking with sister groups across Southwest Florida. This year, the group will sponsor the Spectrum Conference, to learn the modalities of treatment that physicians are using around the world to treat these children.

The Naples Therapeutic Integration Services, Sanibel Island Nutrition Center and the Occupational Therapy Department at FGCU have joined to present this daylong conference for people caring for people with ASD, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., on May 7 at the FGCU. The conference features leading experts on learning and pervasive developmental disorders, from ADD to autism. It's open to all parents and soon-to-be parents, with or without a diagnosis, who will learn to recognize early warning signs so they can take action immediately.

Causes of autism

Kathy Grey, PR for the Southwest Florida Autism Support Group has been prompting the media to investigate the connection between autism and mercury.

"The number of autism cases skyrocketed in the last 20 years," she said. "We think it's related to the use of vaccines that contain mercury. Everybody knows that mercury is toxic for the nervous systems. Many of the symptoms of autism are very similar to those of mercury poisoning."

Grey has a 5-year-old son with autism. She thinks that he had a genetic predisposition that was assaulted by the amalgam fillings she had done in her mouth during pregnancy.

Statistics show a 10-fold increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders since 1985, and the cause of such epidemics has become highly controversial. Presently, around six in 1,000 young children suffer from autism.

Simontacchi became interested in autism five years ago after she interviewed doctor Jeff Bradstreet, director of the International Child Development Resource Center in Palm Bay, Fla. for her book, *Crazy-makers*, on the relationship between what we eat and how our brain functions.

Bradstreet, a specialist in autism-related disorders, had documented a genetic defect in children that makes them vulnerable to thimerosal, a preservative found in some vaccines (flu among them). Thimerosal is 50 percent mercury, a known neuro-toxin. Some studies have found thimerosal to increase the risk of autism-like damage in mice. However, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Immunization Safety Review Committee has repeatedly released reports stating there is not enough evidence to support the association with autism for thimerosal-containing vaccines.

Until just a few years ago, children who received a full schedule of vaccinations were injected with mercury in amounts far exceeding

the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines. Since 2001, all universally recommended childhood vaccines have been available in single-dose vials without thimerosal, which remains as preservative in some non-routine childhood vaccines, like influenza's.

Barbara Linder, occupational therapist and owner of the Therapeutic Integration Services said the onset of the autism epidemic was concomitant with the introduction of the Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) and the Hepatitis B vaccines.

"The exposure to mercury tripled in the first three months of life," she said, when babies are more vulnerable to heavy metals.

There are children who don't detox heavy metals well, and its effect accumulate, explained Linder.

The grassroots organization of parents of children with autism, Mercury Ban, is working toward a ban of mercury from infant and pregnant mom vaccines in 23 states, including Florida. Last year, Florida Congressmen Dave Weldon M.D., introduced legislation to eliminate mercury from vaccines.

"Suddenly two baseball players, Don Marino among them, and a friend had children with autism. I got intrigued. I investigated," Weldon said.

The Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics and vaccine manufacturers agreed five years ago that thimerosal-containing vaccines should be removed, Weldon said. Why haven't all of the vaccines with thimerosal have been removed?, he asked rhetorically.

Weldon also stated that, "The IOM report is premature, perhaps perilously reliant on epidemiology, based on preliminary incomplete information, and may ultimately be repudiated. This report will not deter me from my commitment to seeing that this is fully investigated, nor will it put to rest the concerns of parents who believe their children were harmed by mercury-containing vaccines or the MMR vaccine."

Steven Goodman, MD, MHS, Ph.D, an associate professor of oncology and epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, Md. and member of the IOM panel that issued their last report on thimerosal, said, "It was clear from the report that we were not giving thimerosal a clean bill of health. Mercury is definitely a neurotoxin. We didn't say that thimerosal is something that we should want in vaccines; we said that the safest vaccines are indeed thimerosal-free vaccines. We only said that the evidence favored that there was not a connection between autism and thimerosal exposure."

Speakers at Spectrum Conference

The Spectrum Conference at the FGCU will be an opportunity to discuss and learn more on these topics. The following are the key-speakers at the event.

Simontacchi will present on *The Nutrient Connection to Learning Disorders*, including the importance of antioxidant and fatty acid nutrition, and will provide a hands-on approach to providing good nutrition to children.

Barbara Linder, occupational therapist and owner of the Therapeutic Integration Services in Naples, will present *Sensory Integration: A Healthy Approach for Children*. She is very positive about the results of this technique with autistic spectrum children.

Eric Rydland, director at the Rydland Pediatric Wellness Center, and founder and developer of KidsWellness, where he works with special needs children, is listed as a DAN! (Defeat Autism Now!) pediatrician. He will speak on the role of chelation therapy in the treatment of ASD, and present an update on the latest in autism treatments.

School psychologist and Director of the McGinnis Psychology Group in Fort Myers, J. Christopher McGinnis, will present *First Things First: Earliest Identification and Intervention for Children with Autism*, focusing on red flags and research-based evaluation methods which increase the likelihood of the earliest possible detection of autism, as well as considerations regarding early intervention efforts.

For more information on the conference call Carol Simontacchi at 472-4499.

* The names were changed to protect the privacy of the family.





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