

From Monsters and Critics.com

CONSUMER HEALTH

The Age of Autism: 'The facts say maybe'

By Dan Olmsted

Nov 10, 2005, 19:00 GMT

WASHINGTON, DC, United States (UPI) -- A small text block on the cover of the current Columbia Journalism Review may be a lot bigger than it looks:

'Drug Test. Q: Does thimerosal cause autism? A: The press says no; the facts say maybe.'

Thimerosal is the mercury preservative that was used in childhood vaccines; some parents and researchers blame it for an astonishing rise in autism diagnoses in the past decade, but the media has tended to treat the idea as dangerous, discredited 'junk science.'

'Steeped in controversy and intrigue, the thimerosal debate has all the makings of a compelling news story, yet it has been approached with caution by the news media, which, more often than not, don't portray it as a legitimate scientific debate,' writes CJR Assistant Editor Daniel Schulman in the accompanying article.

His closing line leaves no doubt that he thinks that's a bad idea. '(W)ith science left to be done and scientists eager to do it, it seems too soon for the press to shut the door on the debate.'

To understand why that's a big deal, consider two stories, both running Tuesday: one on the front page of The New York Times, the other leading the Health section of The Washington Post.

'5 Cases of Polio in Amish Group Raise New Fears' was the headline on the Times article by Gardiner Harris. He reported from Long Prairie, Minn., about the discovery of polio virus in an 8-year-old Amish child.

'(T)he girl is now a wellspring for polio, a modern-day Typhoid Mary who can pass it along to others,' Harris wrote. 'Anyone who has not been vaccinated is vulnerable. And though vaccination rates in the United States are at historic highs, an increasing number of parents are resisting inoculations for their children, fearing that they may cause disorders like autism, a connection scientists have almost universally discounted.'

The Post article, by Sandra G. Boodman, was headlined 'Feuding Over Vaccines/Doctors Vexed by Parents' Refusal.' It, too, mentioned the concern that vaccines are linked to autism and quotes a doctor reassuring a patient that 'multiple studies by prestigious groups have found no evidence that vaccines cause autism. ... His equanimity in the face of what many pediatricians say are persistent myths that circulate on the Internet -- that mercury used as a preservative in childhood vaccines causes autism, that the dangers of immunizations far outweigh the benefits, and that there is a conspiracy by drug companies, doctors and vaccine makers to conceal the harm -- is not shared by other physicians.'

These two stories exactly illustrate Schulman's point: that the media is dismissing the autism-thimerosal theory as almost universally discounted Internet mythology, right up there with conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine know-nothingism. Schulman's valuable service is simply pointing out that, inconveniently, some thoroughly legitimate scientists still say, 'Maybe.'

They include members of the epidemiology department at Columbia's own Mailman School of Public Health. The department chair, Dr. Ezra Susser, wrote The Times in June to complain about a front-page piece that made parents and researchers who remain concerned thimerosal has caused autism look ridiculous.

'Scientists pursuing research on mercury and autism are caricaturized as immune to the 'correct' interpretation of existing studies,' Susser wrote. 'Researchers rejecting a link are depicted as the sole voice of reason. ... Whether mercury in any form (or any of several factors recently introduced to our environment) has anything to do with autism can and should be resolved with rigorous studies and respectful discourse, not moral indictments and denunciations.'

About that earlier Times article, Schulman writes in CJR: 'Headlined 'On Autism's Cause, It's Parents Vs. Research,' the story cast the thimerosal connection as a fringe theory, without scientific merit, held aloft by angry, desperate parents. ... Readers were left with little option but to believe that the case against thimerosal was scientifically unsound.'

The Times did not run Susser's letter and did not change its approach -- its ombudsman effectively told readers who complained to pound sand, and the report from Minnesota on polio and the Amish is more of the same. As is the Post's lumping of the issue with conspiracies and coverup scenarios that only the most equanimous pediatricians could reasonably be expected to tolerate.

We should point out that Schulman mentions Age of Autism in the article. His thesis -- that a careful reading of the facts suggests it's too soon to close the door on thimerosal as the possible cause of a horrendous affliction -- is one we have put forward since beginning this column at the start of the year.

But now that critique is coming not just from 'angry, desperate parents' who need to calm down and stop endangering the rest of us, or the odd reporter who can be dismissed as biased or misguided, but from a respected peer and arbiter, the Columbia Journalism Review.

That's a big deal. It's the kind of thing that makes journalists stop and think -- or ought to, anyway.

This ongoing series on the roots and rise of autism welcomes reader comment. e-mail: dolmsted@upi.com

Copyright 2005 by United Press International

© Copyright 2003 - 2005 by monstersandcritics.com.
This notice cannot be removed without permission.