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## CONSUMER HEALTH

### The Age of Autism: Showdown in Santa Fe

By Dan Olmsted

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WASHINGTON, DC, United States (UPI) -- A pediatrician had an appointment Monday with the New Mexico Board of Pharmacy to deliver a blunt message: Its members need to warn state residents that the mercury in flu shots could be harmful to children -- or risk being remembered for failing to do their job.

The request by Dr. Kenneth Stoller, an assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, opens a new front in an escalating war over the use of a mercury-based preservative in medical products. He is medical director of the Hyperbaric Medical Center of New Mexico and uses hyperbaric oxygen to treat autism.

Six states -- including heavyweights New York, California and Illinois -- have banned the preservative, called thimerosal, from vaccines intended for children and pregnant women. It has been voluntarily phased out of most childhood immunizations but remains in most flu shots.

The American Academy of Pediatrics opposes an outright ban, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has declined to express a preference for the thimerosal-free version of the flu vaccine.

The dynamics are complicated, but the basic issue is whether it's reasonable to fear that thimerosal might cause autism. Stoller says it is; the AAP and the CDC say it is not.

'There is an acute public health issue that very few understand even though several states have banned or limited the use of vaccines containing thimerosal,' says a copy of Stoller's speech he provided Age of Autism. 'In the months and years to come this iatrogenic (doctor-induced) poisoning of Americans and New Mexicans will be fully understood and what you decide to do here today will be noted in the not too distant future.'

'We have a responsibility to perform here and the Board of Pharmacy has the regulatory power to perform it,' he said. 'I am requesting that you issue an immediate advisory so that all New Mexicans who desire to receive the current flu vaccine receive information about what is being injected as there has been a labeling omission (violation). And lastly, I request that you prohibit the use of this flu vaccine that contains thimerosal to all pregnant woman and children under 50 pounds.'

Stoller's concern is emphatically not shared by the physicians group, which has opposed such a ban in other states. Before New York Gov. George Pataki signed a thimerosal ban in August, a state chapter of the AAP urged its rejection.

'This bill, designed to protect individuals from alleged adverse effects of thimerosal which contains ethyl mercury, is completely unnecessary,' said the AAP statement. 'To legislate based on fear and misinformation is an anathema to those of us who work tirelessly for the health and welfare of our communities.'

'To enact this legislation implies that the vaccines that have virtually eradicated many diseases, constituting one of the greatest public health accomplishments of the past century, are dangerous. This bill denigrates our informed scientific and medical communities while supporting all of the anti-vaccine factions in our society. This legislation potentially jeopardizes our most vulnerable communities.'

The CDC says concerns about thimerosal have been allayed by numerous studies. 'As the Institute of Medicine concluded in a recent report, the vast majority of studies, which have involved hundreds of thousands of children in a number of countries, have failed to find any association between exposure to thimerosal in vaccines and autism,' according to the CDC's Web site. <!--page-->

Stoller said medical groups and the federal government are misguidedly trying to protect the childhood immunization program by defending mercury as a vaccine ingredient. He also said they are afraid of massive liability if a link is shown -- some quarter-million Americans have been diagnosed with autism, 80 percent of them under 18.

Careers and credibility are at stake, he added.

'Their throwing sand in everyone's face -- to protect their jobs and their reputations and status -- is interfering with getting these kids the help they need,' he charged. And thimerosal-containing flu shots will create more cases, he said.

Autism diagnoses increased dramatically over the past two decades at the same time that more vaccines containing thimerosal were added to the schedule. In 1999 the U.S. Public Health Service, the AAP and family physicians recommended that manufacturers phase out thimerosal in childhood vaccines as soon as possible.

Most flu shots, however, continue to contain a full dose of thimerosal. The CDC -- which now recommends flu shots for pregnant women and infants 6 to 23 months old -- has declined to express a preference for non-thimerosal flu shots out of what it says is concern that parents might be reluctant to vaccinate their children unless they can find it.

'Most New Mexicans haven't received their flu vaccines yet,' Stoller told Age of Autism. 'I'm asking them to issue an urgent

advisory letting them know the danger and the risk of the thimerosal flu vaccine which accounts for about 90 percent of the flu vaccine in New Mexico and the United States.'

He said that while New Mexico has ordered some thimerosal-free vaccines for infants and pregnant women, private-practice physicians are likely to order the thimerosal-containing multiple-dose vials.

This ongoing series on the roots and rise of autism welcomes reader comment. E-mail: [dolmsted@upi.com](mailto:dolmsted@upi.com)

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