

Facts and Fiction About Thimerosal in Vaccines

November 18, 2002

Dear Colleague:

During the past 24 hours, a number of incorrect statements have been made about the vaccine provisions in the Homeland Security Act. The facts are simple. These provisions severely restrict the legal rights of parents who believe their children have suffered neurological damage due to vaccines. The scientific debate remains unresolved. These provisions do not belong in the Homeland Security Act. I hope the following points will help separate fact from fiction.

FICTION: Scientists have concluded that there is no causal connection between mercury-containing thimerosal and neurological disorders such as autism.

FACT: In 2001, the respected Institute of Medicine concluded that a connection between thimerosal and autism, while unproven, is "biologically plausible." The IOM called for further research, stating, "the evidence is inadequate to accept or reject a causal relationship between exposure to thimerosal from vaccines and neurological developmental disorders of autism, ADHD, and speech and language delays."

FACT: Researchers in the state of California concluded this year that there is no statistical explanation for the nearly 300% increase in cases of autism in that state. "It is astounding to see a threefold increase in autism with no explanation," said Dr. Robert Byrd, an epidemiologist who led the study. "There's a number of things that need to be answered. We need to rethink the possible causes of autism."

FACT: An internal HHS document produced to the House Government Reform Committee during its investigation into vaccine safety described what it referred to as a "weak signal" in its data linking thimerosal to neurological disorders:

"Preliminary screening of ICD-9 codes for possible neurologic and renal conditions following exposures to vaccines containing thimerosal before 3 months of age showed a statistical association for the overall category of neurological developmental disorders and for two conditions within the category, speech delay and attention deficit disorder."

FACT: If there were no concerns that scientific research would demonstrate a connection between thimerosal and autism, Sections 1714-1717 would not have been tacked onto the Homeland Security Act in the eleventh hour with no debate.

FICTION: Sections 1714-1717 do not eliminate the rights of vaccine-injured individuals to sue manufacturers of vaccines and their components. Proponents of these provisions have stated that once individuals have gone through the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program they can still choose to file a civil law suit.

FACT: For many families who believe their children were injured by mercury-based thimerosal, these provisions do eliminate their right to file suits. The Vaccine Injury Compensation Program has a narrow 3-year statute of limitations. Because many families were unaware of the program, they were unable to file a petition on time. Sections 1714-1717 take away their only remaining legal recourse.

FICTION: Thimerosal has now been removed from all childhood vaccines and is therefore no longer a concern.

FACT: While thimerosal has recently been removed from most pediatric vaccines used in the United States, it is still used in the flu vaccine given every year to millions of Americans, including children as young as six months old.

FACT: The argument that thimerosal has been removed from most pediatric vaccines is beside the point. Because the FDA was painfully slow to seek the removal of thimerosal during the 1990's, millions of children across the country were exposed to this mercury-based preservative at a time when concerns about its health effects were emerging. The legal rights of these children should not be curtailed.

Please vote to strip Sections 1714-1717 from the Homeland Security Act. Fifteen years ago, only 1 in 10,000 children was autistic. Today that number has skyrocketed to 1 in 250. Let's not be stampeded into cutting off the legal rights of these children without hearings and a full public debate.

Sincerely,

Dan Burton
Chairman
House Committee on Government Reform