

# Vaccines blamed for autism

Parents believe mercury-containing preservative made children ill and push for legal remedies

By Graham Brink / *St. Petersburg Times*

**MELBOURNE, Fla.** -- At the age of 10 months, Alex Wilmarth could say "Hi" and "Bye bye," "Mama" and "Dada." The little boy would giggle at funny faces and wave goodbye.

He could make regular eye contact and was beginning to walk without help. To his parents, Deborah and Vance, Alex seemed perfect.

Then it was like someone flicked off a switch. Alex began staring into space. His speech turned to gibberish. He reverted back to crawling.

Then came the tantrums and the fixation with water and cars. He grew older, but still couldn't dress or feed himself.

Eventually, the doctors diagnosed autism.

In their struggle for information, the Wilmarths stumbled onto a startling theory. Some researchers, they learned, were examining possible links between autism and poisoning from common childhood vaccinations administered in the 1990s.

Today, a growing number of parents across the country are convinced that a mercury-containing preservative used in many vaccinations caused their children's autism.

In what some lawyers say could be the next wave in litigation, hundreds of parents have joined a national legal campaign to hold pharmaceutical companies liable for exposing as many as 30 million children to the vaccines.

The companies and several government-funded agencies say the vaccines are safe. The parents' theory is based more on coincidence and desperate hope than hard data, they say.

Still, lawyers from across the country have banded together in coalitions to share information and strategies. "It's either going to be nothing," said lawyer Jack Hamilton of Melbourne, Fla., who is handling some of the Florida cases. "Or it'll be the biggest thing to come down the litigation pipeline, ever."

## Researchers baffled

Autistic children suffer from a neurological disorder that has baffled researchers, who don't know why it occurs or how to prevent it. The children can have trouble communicating and socializing. They often have attention deficit traits and trouble with language.

In the worst cases, they will never learn to talk or feed themselves. They bang their heads against walls and stab themselves with sharp objects. They spend their lives suspended in an impenetrable world often marked by endless rocking. They will never tell a parent, "I love you."

Some who are skeptical of the link between vaccines and autism say those frustrations are what is fueling the flawed theory. But some parents and a core of doctors and researchers cast aside the criticism as condescending and typical of a medical bureaucracy with a history of responding to controversies at glacial speed.

The evidence, they say, leads directly to thimerosal, a mercury-containing preservative used to kill bacteria and fungus in vaccines.

While thimerosal has been used since the 1930s, it became more common in the last 15 years as pharmaceutical companies began to produce more multidose vials to cut costs. Without the preservative, a multi-dose vial could be tainted with organisms once the seal was broken by the first puncture.

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## **Autism rates jump**

Autism rates have exploded around the country in the past 15 years -- the same period in which thimerosal became more prevalent in vaccines. In California, they point out, the number of autistic children soared 273 percent between 1987 and 1999, while the state's overall population rose only about 20 percent.

Many of the new wave of autistic children had high levels of mercury in their systems, the backers say, and the symptoms of mercury poisoning mimic the behavior of autistic children. Also, this new wave affects boys even more than usual. So does mercury poisoning.

"Have you ever seen a profoundly autistic child?" Dr. Stephanie Cave asked recently from her clinic in Baton Rouge, La. "It'll break your heart, especially if you think it could have been prevented."

Cave is convinced thimerosal plays a key role in why about one in 150 toddlers develop the disorder, a huge increase from 20 years ago. By medically removing metals such as mercury from autistic toddlers exposed to thimerosal, they often make "remarkable recoveries," Cave said.

She thinks that suggests mercury played a role in the first place.

## **Heart-wrenching stories**

In the other corner are the giants of health care, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Network for Immunization Information and the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They say the links are far from proven.

The definition of autism has expanded over the years and doctors are better educated in diagnosing the disorder, they say. Parents also know that to get extra help from the school system they need the child to be designated as autistic.

The often quoted report about the California statistics didn't determine how many of the new cases moved in from other states, they say. Parents of autistic children sometimes move to a state like California because it provides more help and funding for treating autism.

The parents involved in the lawsuits have heart-wrenching stories, potentially potent ammunition for savvy plaintiffs' lawyers facing off against deep-pocketed drug companies.

The stories could be particularly convincing to a jury of nonscientists who only have to agree that a majority of the evidence they hear establishes a link between the vaccines and autism.

"I think the drug companies thought this might just go away," said Miami lawyer Roberto Villasante. "That won't be happening any time soon."