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**T H E H U F F I N G T O N P O S T .**

## **Doctors Against Research**

**By David Kirby**

**March 22, 2006**

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Here's the bad news: If you are a pregnant woman reading this, there is a 1-in-166 chance that your child will develop autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If it's a boy, the odds are about 1-in-80; twin boys, half that.

Now here's the worse news: Apparently, your pediatrician's professional academy doesn't want Congress to do anything about it.

Consider this: There is a bill making its way through Congress, The Combating Autism Act, which would authorize \$860 million in federal funds over five years for autism screening, intervention, education and research -- including a doubling of autism funding at NIH. It is a landmark piece of bipartisan legislation, crafted with great care by co-sponsors Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT).

The bill has been endorsed by every major autism organization in America (no mean feat in itself) and is being championed -- in person and on The Hill -- by such influential citizens as NBC President Bob Wright and his wife Suzanne, founders of Autism Speaks, and Deirdre Imus, a leading fighter for the environmental health of all children and wife of the sharp-tongued host of the morning airwaves.

With backing from such mainstream quarters, you'd think that this law would be sailing through Congress. And, you'd think that the American Academy of Pediatrics -- whose members deal daily with autism -- would be scrambling to get the thing passed. But you would be wrong.

In January, lobbyists for the AAP told a small group, gathered in Washington for a private meeting about the bill, that the academy could not, and would not support it. Why not? Because it directs millions of dollars towards "research on a broad array of environmental factors that have a possible role in autism, including but not limited to vaccines, other biological and pharmaceutical products, and their components (including preservatives)."

In other words, Congress wants to study thimerosal -- the mercury containing vaccine preservative and possible contributor to some autism cases -- and that makes the powerful AAP very, very unhappy.

"Any bill that contains any questions about vaccines, we are not going to endorse," one lobbyist informed the group. "There is absolutely no link between thimerosal and autism. Period. To endorse the bill implies that this is an open question, and it is not."

"The bottom line," the lobbyist continued, to stunned silence, "is that we don't want to look into this. It is inappropriate to waste precious research dollars on something that we know will be disproved."

Apparently, the pediatricians haven't gotten the memo from the CDC. The folks in Atlanta are still very much looking into thimerosal and autism, as are officials at the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), which just funded and published two very significant studies. One showed that mercury from thimerosal accumulates rapidly in the brains of infant primates (after converting to inorganic mercury); and the other showed that a few minutes of

exposure with even miniscule amounts of thimerosal can damage dendritic cells, causing immune dysfunction and cytokine-induced inflammation, both of which are found in autism.

Other research continues at places like Harvard, Columbia, Northeastern and Arizona State University, where the first-ever trial of chelation therapy (removal of heavy metals) for autism is about to wrap up.

So while numerous experts are still seeking answers, the AAP is whispering "Stop."

A spokeswoman for the academy would say only that, "the AAP has not taken a position on the bill," nor would she say when, or even if such a decision would be made.

To be fair, there is a long and complicated process involved when the academy does decide to act on legislation, and the private remarks of a few staffers do not equal AAP policy. But the pediatricians' official silence to date on a bill that is so critical to their own constituency is a bit, well, baffling. Their lack of support for the measure -- thimerosal research or not -- is equally hard to fathom. If, as the AAP asserts, thimerosal is perfectly safe to inject into infants and pregnant women -- even in miniscule amounts -- then clearly this federal research will bear that out.

Maybe the AAP will eventually endorse the bill. But I don't have my money on it. Capitol Hill staffers told me that Senator Dodd had to browbeat the academy into neutrality on the measure. They wanted to oppose it flat out.

It's an ironic, turned-around world when children's doctors don't support federal research into a terrible disorder that affects children.

But then again, irony and the AAP have crossed paths before. Even as the good doctors joined a federal lawsuit to limit mercury emissions from coal-fired plants -- complaining that the toxic heavy metal is hazardous to fetuses and infant children -- they worked with local chapters to fight state laws banning mercury in vaccines. Last year, an AAP chapter in New York urged Governor Pataki to veto that state's bill, warning it could lead to flu shot shortages. He signed anyway. (Flu vaccine makers, incidentally, stand ready to supply as much mercury-free formula as needed, if only the CDC would ask for it --which it inexplicably has not).

The AAP recently sent a letter to its chapters offering help, "If your state is considering thimerosal ban legislation." It even listed the phone number and email address of an AAP executive, Ian Van Dinther, who can supply chapters with "additional legislative resources on this issue."

In other words, folks, your family doctor has a message for you: "Shut up and take your medicine."