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Eight years before the U.S. government decided to remove mercury from most childhood vaccines, federal health officials were already receiving reports linking vaccinations to new cases of autism.

Starting in 1991 after the government set up a database to record adverse reactions to vaccines, doctors, parents and others reported frightening responses to inoculations in children subsequently diagnosed with autism.

Vaccinated children exhibited severe brain damage, high-pitched "hyena" laughs and screams, drunken behavior, senseless babbling, infantile spasms and seizures, "bug-eyed" looks, and the complete loss of abilities like toilet training and language, according to the Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS).

There were 83 such reports from across the country before the government asked vaccine manufacturers in 1999 to remove thimerosal -- a preservative containing mercury.

The government still denies that toxic mercury injected into infants caused a huge increase in autism prevalence, but parents say federal officials did not act upon reports linking vaccines to autism quickly enough.

"My stomach twisted and turned," Acton parent Jeannie Meijer wrote in an e-mail after reading the reports. "It's tough to think that if people had been paying more attention, or been more honest, the autism epidemic may not have happened and my son may have been spared. Really tough."

The 83 autism reports in the 1990s in VAERS were submitted as evidence in a Texas court case that ended last year.

Government officials say the VAERS database cannot be used to draw conclusions about autism because it records reports from anyone, whether they be doctors, patients or lawyers. But government officials relied on VAERS data when it suspended a rotavirus vaccine in 1999 after just 15 reports linking it to infant bowel obstruction.

VAERS had already recorded 15 reports linking vaccines to autism by 1994.

"Why would the governmental agencies charged with ensuring a safe vaccine supply ignore so many reports and continue to put millions of children at risk, including both of our sons?" asked Jared Hansen, a Framingham parent of two autistic boys. "Who benefits from the silence?"

Hansen and his wife, Marjorie, filed one of 4,700 claims pending in a national vaccine court alleging that thimerosal in vaccines caused their children to be autistic. The cases, which are being heard in a single proceeding, are expected to be resolved in about three years. Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Legislature is considering a proposal to ban thimerosal in the state.

After hearing government officials spend years denying any connection between vaccines and autism, the Hansens found it disturbing to read the VAERS reports from long before mercury was removed from infant shots.

"It was actually pretty emotional," Jared said. "My wife was crying about it....There's so much of it that's familiar. You read through it, there's a real pattern that emerges. It's disturbing to think this was all before my sons were exposed."

Federal health officials deny the VAERS reports should have spurred earlier action on mercury in vaccines. The VAERS data "in and of itself is not a strong signal," said Glen Nowak, spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"It's not a database that was ever designed to track the incidence or prevalence of any disease or disorder," Nowak said.

In the case of the rotavirus vaccine, there was evidence from clinical trials suggesting it may cause bowel obstruction in some infants even before the vaccine hit the market, Nowak said. Therefore, health officials were on the lookout for adverse events related to the rotavirus vaccine, but did not look for patterns the VAERS database might have shown in autism reporting.

The VAERS autism reports also did not mention the mercury preservative specifically, Nowak said. But he did not deny that the government knew mercury -- a neurotoxin -- was present in vaccines.

While the rotavirus vaccine is now off the market, the U.S. Public Health Service in 1999 asked -- but did not require -- manufacturers to remove mercury from vaccines. Thimerosal was phased out of most infant shots over several years, but it is still widely used in flu shots routinely given to babies and pregnant women.

Research investigating a potential link between vaccines and autism was spurred by huge increases in the disease's prevalence observed in the 1990s after the government more than doubled the amount of mercury infants were being given through vaccines.

An Institute of Medicine report in 2004 found no link between autism and thimerosal. "There were five very solid epidemiologic studies (we looked at). All of them came down on the side of no association between thimerosal and autism," said Dr. Marie McCormick, a Harvard professor who was chairman of the IOM committee.

But a confidential CDC study in 2000 actually found that children were 2.5 times more likely to develop autism when they receive 62.5 micrograms of mercury from vaccines at 3 months of age. The study was uncovered by an advocacy group under the Freedom of Information Act.

"They're on record saying there's no effect from thimerosal, it's completely safe, even though their own internal studies show it's harmful," said researcher David Geier.

Children injected with 62.5 micrograms of mercury in a single day, as many were, were given a dose 129 times higher than a federal safety limit, Geier said.

Last week, Geier and his father, Dr. Mark Geier, reported that an analysis of VAERS and two other databases shows that new autism diagnoses have declined since thimerosal was removed from most childhood vaccines, a finding supportive of an autism-vaccine connection.

Parents and researchers who believe thimerosal causes autism say the government should have identified this possibility years ago when they began receiving reports from doctors and families.

CDC officials argue that the VAERS database is not reliable in part because it is influenced by media reporting on certain diseases. The media influence may be seen in nearly 800 autism reports filed since 2000.

But the 83 reports in the 1990s came before the topic received widespread media coverage, and likely represent just a fraction of autism cases caused by thimerosal, advocates said.

Andy Waters, an attorney who submitted the reports as evidence in the Texas court case, decided to use data only from the 1990s because "I didn't want it to be an artifact of the press."

Waters' case alleging that a child became autistic because of thimerosal was dismissed after he failed to prove the preservative harmed the specific child. But Texas Judge T. John Ward's ruling states that the court could not dismiss a general link between pediatric vaccines and autism.

The VAERS database, while not definitive proof of harm caused by thimerosal, provides parents a chilling reminder of their own struggles. Jeannie Meijer watched her son Matthew, born in 2000, develop normally until he was 18 months old. Then, like many other children who received mercury-containing vaccines, Matthew regressed until the only word he could say was "mama."

The federal database includes reports of autistic children with encephalopathy, literally a disease that alters brain function or structure. An Illinois boy suffered a major seizure eight hours after a vaccine, resulting in permanent brain damage.

Another autistic child lost the ability to play and began acting deaf. One girl less than a year old developed spasms lasting 15 minutes just hours after a vaccination. Another repeatedly banged his head and still another was hospitalized with "full-blown" seizures.

Bobbie Manning, who has a 10-year-old son with autism, said on the day his son was born he was given a dose of mercury in a Hepatitis B vaccine that would be considered safe under federal guidelines only if he had weighed 550 pounds.

Manning, vice president of A-CHAMP, a New York-based parents' advocacy group, was shocked when she began learning about mercury's presence in vaccines.

"I thought to myself, if I gave my child thimerosal, I'd be going to jail," she said.