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A Poisonous Move for Kids by CDC

By Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

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On February 22, CDC announced that it is dramatically expanding America's flu vaccination program to include all children between six months and 5 years and their siblings and caretakers. But, guess what CDC forgot to mention? There is not nearly enough thimerosal-free flu vaccine to go around. Vaccine makers produced fewer than 8 million thimerosal-free flu doses this season, which doesn't bode well for the more than 17 million children designated to receive flu shots under CDC's new protocol.

Thimerosal is the mercury-based preservative that has been linked to the epidemic of neurological disorders including speech delays, language delays, hyperactivity, attention-deficit disorder, and autism in American children born after 1989. CDC recommended the removal of thimerosal from children's vaccines by 2001, but most flu vaccinations still contain 25 micrograms of thimerosal in every 0.5ml dose. Under CDC's new recommendations, every American child under five will be injected once each year, with a double dose for first-timers. By his fifth birthday, a child whose parents cannot obtain the child-safe vaccine will have received up to 100 micrograms of thimerosal, which is half ethyl mercury. A recent scientific study indicates that many children will retain the tissue-destroying toxin in their brain and organs for years. CDC has moved aggressively to cut funding and derail follow-up studies that examine the impacts of retained mercury in children's brains.

In its announcement, CDC admitted that the health risks from flu to children do not justify the dramatic expansion of the vaccination program. For the first time in history, CDC rationalized the new protocols by arguing that the inoculations will spare parents and the health care industry significant lost work time now spent taking care of sick children. Although framed as a recommendation, CDC's new protocols function as mandates, since they establish the standards of care for the medical profession. Doctors who fall short of that standard are liable if a patient were to die from flu.

Since CDC is not requiring production of thimerosal-free children's flu vaccines, its expanded recommendations are bound to provoke a scramble among parents, pediatricians and HMOs to get their hands on the limited stashes of thimerosal-free flu vaccines.

CDC's new protocols contemplate inoculating 185 million Americans with influenza vaccines. The industry shipped only 81 million doses this year, so even before CDC announced its new requirements, the battle to secure flu vaccines was ferocious. When vaccine manufacturer Sanofi Pasteur opened its phone lines to accept pre-orders on January 31, it was flooded with calls from physicians, hospitals and HMOs desperate to reserve vaccines. During the first 30 minutes Sanofi got 40,000 phone calls and over 200,000 calls within eight hours, collapsing its

communications system. By week's end it had received 400,000 calls -- more than the company customarily receives in a year.

Mercury-free flu shots are in particularly short supply. Sanofi, the only commercial supplier of thimerosal-free pediatric influenza vaccines, produced only eight million children's doses this year. CDC's announcement increases the pool of targeted children by over 11 million kids, ages 2 to 5 years old. Only about one-third of America's children under age five will be lucky enough to get the child-safe vaccines. While CDC's Director of Immunizations Dr. Lance Rodewald assured me he expects no shortage of thimerosal-free vaccine, doctors and medical groups are telling a different story. Those who customarily give their patients only thimerosal-free flu shots are already finding that the industry cannot fill their orders for the 2006-2007 season.

Pediatrician Lawrence Rosen, Director of Pediatrics at Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood, New Jersey, told us that his eight-doctor family medical practice had been informed by Sanofi that the company was unable to fill his order for next season. "It was like trying to get tickets to a Rolling Stones concert," he said. Sanofi will give him only 300 of the 900 thimerosal-free doses he needs. "The only other shots I can get contain thimerosal, and I'm not going to do that." According to Rosen, the problem is widespread across the country, with very few practices able to fill their orders for flu shots. "The gist is there's not enough *safe* vaccine. The government wants us to give more shots, but there's no supply. They are leaving millions of kids between the ages of 3 and 5 with no option -- millions of kids."

Sanofi has said that the company was prepared to double production of thimerosal-free children's flu vaccine, but that there were no requests from CDC or the State Health Departments that it do so. Indeed CDC has ordered 3.5 million doses from Sanofi for its Vaccines for Children Program, which provides vaccines to economically disadvantaged children mainly in minority communities. Only a fraction of these will be thimerosal-free, according to Rodewald. He refused to disclose the precise number.

Why will CDC inject millions of minority kids in America's poorest neighborhoods with poison proven to kill brain tissue and cause learning disorders when child-safe vaccines are available? CDC's spokesperson Glen Nowak explained to me the agency "doesn't have a preference for thimerosal-free vaccines" despite its repeated statements to the contrary since 1999. CDC also admitted it has no efforts underway to further educate the public about thimerosal, or to encourage manufacturers to move more quickly toward 100 percent mercury-free vaccines.

CDC's recommendation to vaccinate millions of additional children without assuring any additional capacity of thimerosal-free vaccines is a bad one. It will almost certainly encounter stiff resistance as skeptical parents and pediatricians balk at injecting young children with a known brain poison by order of bureaucrats that they increasingly don't trust.