Feds Aim to Boost Faith in Childhood Vaccines

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
Senior Writer

Federal health officials called a press conference last month to try to restore public confidence in childhood vaccines despite the charge by some parents that there is a connection between the vaccines and autism.

The issue has become a hot topic with print and online articles by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in support of a link between autism and use of mercury-based thimerosal as a preservative in childhood vaccines. In those articles and during at least one television appearance, Mr. Kennedy also charged that there has been a federal cover up of data confirming the link. The day after the Washington, D.C., press conference, several autism advocacy groups rallied on Capitol Hill to protest

Since 2001, childhood vaccines have contained no or trace amounts of thimerosal.

DR. GERBERDING

the use of thimerosal in vaccines.

But CDC director Julie Gerberding, M.D., said the predominance of evidence does not show an association between thimerosal in vaccines and autism.

Thimerosal has been used in vaccines as a preservative. However, since 2001 all vaccines recommended for children age 6 years and younger have either had no thimerosal or have contained only trace amounts.

One exception is the inactivated influenza vaccine. However, a preservative-free version, which contains trace amounts of thimerosal, is available in limited supplies.

FDA officials are working with vaccine manufacturers to increase the supply of those doses, said Murray M. Lumpkin, M.D., acting deputy commissioner for international and special programs at the Food and Drug Administration.

In addition, all new vaccines licensed since 1999 are free of thimerosal as a preservative. Dr. Lumpkin said.

Dr. Gerberding said government researchers will continue to look at whether the evidence supports a link between thimerosal and autism but said it's important for researchers, policy makers, and parents not to base decisions on "unproved hypotheses."

"Today the best available science indicates to us that vaccines save lives," she said.

Researchers are trying to get an estimate of the prevalence of autism in children, and Dr. Gerberding said some of that data will be available next year.

In addition, researchers with the National Institutes of Health are investigating the risk factors and biological markers for autism.

"We need a war on autism, not a war on childhood vaccines," said Peter Hotez, M.D., chair of the department of microbiology and tropical medicine at George Washington University, Washington, and the father of an autistic child.

Dr. Hotez said he is confident that vaccines had nothing to do with his daughter's autism, and if he could turn back time he would still give his daughter the full complement of vaccines.

Instead, he said that parents should be reminded of the consequences of not vaccinating their children. And attention should shift from unfounded claims about vaccines to the need for respite care and other services for families with autistic children.

Dr. Hotez also called for more research into the cause of autism and genetic testing for the disease. ■

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