

Editorial

Whistleblower Issue and Its Relevance in Autism Research

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On August 27, 2014, CDC scientist Dr. William Thompson admitted that he and other authors had omitted vital data from a 2004 study of possible connections between MMR vaccines and autism [1]. Dr. Thompson also acknowledged a biologically plausible relationship between Thimerosal (a mercury-based preservative) in vaccines and autistic-like symptoms. He additionally reported that the CDC has withheld information about a relationship between Thimerosal and tic disorders. Whether or not a person thinks that the admissions made by this CDC scientist reflect the truth, admitting fraud in the CDC's neurodevelopmental disorders research is certainly newsworthy. Why then has the mainstream media been mostly silent on the issue? The coverage of this story has been mostly limited to the blogosphere. Some of the mainstream media's top stories have instead included: "Artists draws his dog in whimsical scenes" (ABC News, 9/17/14); "Is the tide changing for the NFL" (MSNBC, 9/17/2014); and "Vikings: Peterson must stay away", and "Final hours before Scotland's big vote" (CNN, 9/17/14).

Admittedly, this CDC whistleblower story is controversial. This is due, in part, to enormous and far-reaching liability ramifications, to the disturbing number of potentially affected children, and because those that could be held accountable hold powerful and authoritative governmental positions. We can only speculate if the mainstream media is simply not interested in this topic, or if their silence reflects a form of disagreement, or if possibly their lack of coverage is due to external pressure to extinguish the story. The limited mainstream media coverage of such a weighty scientific matter reveals the importance of scientists themselves having a public voice on critical public policy issues. Throughout history scientists speaking loudly about dangerous toxins have saved many lives and prevented untold

pain and deformities. Clear examples are Pink disease (caused by mercury in teething powders), lead poisoning diseases (from lead-based paints and other products), and thalidomide causing birth defects. And also, of course, the discovery that mercury causes neurological damage. The mainstream media's silence here emphasizes the value of peer-reviewed science journals as an avenue for scientists to be a part of necessary public dialogues.

This story also raises the issue of the importance of transparency in research and the availability of public databases to independent researchers. The current datasets used by the CDC in their own research on vaccines and autism are not easily accessible to independent researchers. For example, one of the databases used by the CDC that reportedly showed no relationship between thimerosal and autism [2] is no longer available to anyone outside of the CDC to examine.

Neuropsychiatric disorder research data transparency is especially important considering today's staggering numbers of neurodevelopmental disorders, which in the United States has increased to about 1 in every 6 children [3]. This has predominately been an increase in autism and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, but there has also been an increase in tic disorders [4]. World-wide, neurodevelopmental disorders today are causing heavy burdens on the affected individuals and their families [5].

How this story unfolds remains to be seen. However, assuming continued mainstream media silence, it is likely that this whistleblower story along with its potential implications will remain missing from the forefront of public discussion.

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