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Los Angeles Times

April 17, 2000, Monday, Home Edition
SECTION: Metro; Part B; Page 7; Op Ed Desk

LENGTH: 726 words

HEADLINE: COMMENTARY;
BAD INFORMATION CAN BE DEADLY; VACCINES: AN UNSUBSTANTIATED LINK TO
AUTISM IS HAMPERING EFFORTS TO END CHILDHOOD DISEASES.

BYLINE: HENRY A. WAXMAN, U.S. Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) is the senior Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee and was chairman of the health and the environment subcommittee from 1979-1994

BODY: First, do no harm.

That's the Hippocratic oath that doctors swear to uphold. And it's the rule that congressional committees should follow as well.

Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), the chairman of the House Government Reform Committee, held a hearing this month to publicize his conviction that childhood vaccines cause autism. We heard heart-rending testimony from parents of autistic children who sincerely believe that vaccines caused their children's condition. And a few hand-picked researchers lent a scientific veneer by testifying that they believe vaccines may cause autism.

This is the kind of news that can alarm millions of families. That's why it's essential that parents know that the American Medical Assn., the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and virtually every medical expert around the world have reached a different conclusion: The scientific evidence does not support a causal association between vaccines and autism. Disregarding this evidence or overstating the dangers of childhood immunization runs the risk of needlessly scaring parents from vaccinating their children.

Failing to immunize our children exposes them to risks of serious illness, disability and death. Every year, 2.5 million children die and 750,000 are crippled worldwide from childhood diseases. Once common and now rare in our country, rubella causes deafness, blindness and mental retardation. Measles, mistakenly viewed by some as an innocuous childhood illness, caused 11,000 hospitalizations and 120 deaths in our country during a 1989-91 epidemic. Today, a measles epidemic in Afghanistan has killed as many as 900 people, most of them children.

The dangers of a vaccine-autism scare are real. In 1998, British surgeon Andrew Wakefield published a preliminary report alleging that autism in 12 children was associated with the measles-mumps-rubella

vaccine. The resulting hysteria quickly drove measles immunization rates in Britain below the level experts say is necessary to avoid an epidemic.

In Ireland, health officials report that a similar drop in MMR vaccinations has caused a more than tenfold increase in reported measles cases since last year. As one Irish official noted: "The end result will be that an epidemic of measles may come back unnecessarily, and some children will suffer permanent damage or even die."

At the congressional hearing, Burton invited Wakefield to present his latest unpublished findings linking autism in 26 children with the measles vaccine. Yet Wakefield has made similar announcements in the past, only to have them invalidated when his findings could not be duplicated.

Large-scale studies in Sweden, Finland and Britain have found no causal connection between vaccines and autism. The British government has reviewed and refuted the allegations, concluding most recently on April 3 that "there is no new evidence to suggest a causal link between MMR vaccination and autism." Not only has the data not withstood independent scientific scrutiny, but the very premise of Wakefield's theory has been repudiated by most experts who have examined it.

Everyone agrees that more autism research is essential. We should learn what causes it, how to treat it and how to prevent it. Moreover, we should insist that vaccines be as safe as possible and continue to investigate any possible association between autism and vaccines. The CDC is studying more than 2,000 children to evaluate any association between autism and the MMR vaccine. The National Institutes of Health also is investigating vaccines and autism. And Congress is considering legislation to increase autism research.

In talking with the parents of autistic children, it's impossible not to be affected by the profound frustration and loss they feel. The parents who testified described how almost overnight they lost contact with the children they knew. They are right to demand that we pay more attention to this cruel condition.

Yet as we increase research, we must also make sure that every parent knows that the best available science does not support a link between vaccines and autism. Nothing could be more harmful than to mislead parents about these facts and to encourage an unwarranted mistrust of vaccines, leaving our children defenseless before terrible childhood diseases.