

Statement of
Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
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Today we are having another hearing to highlight allegations regarding the safety of vaccines.

In April, this Committee held a hearing to publicize the Chairman's theory that certain vaccines, particularly the MMR vaccine, cause autism. This theory is based mainly on speculation. As the American Medical Association concluded recently, "Scientific data does not support a causal association between vaccination and autism."

Today we will hear testimony about a new theory: that there is a link between autism and the mercury-based vaccine preservative called thimerosal. It should be noted that the MMR vaccine does not contain thimerosal. So this new theory is directed at childhood vaccines other than for measles, mumps and rubella.

As I said in April, we must not get ahead of the science or raise false alarms. The best answers come from research that can withstand the rigors of the scientific method. These standards have been developed in order to find the truth.

But if allegations are raised without scientific evidence, we risk scaring parents into foregoing potentially life-saving childhood immunizations.

Regrettably, I fear that once again we are proceeding without a sound scientific basis.

This hearing combines two issues I have worked on for years: autism and mercury.

I have been a strong supporter of research and treatment for autism. I am a current sponsor of autism research and surveillance legislation, H.R. 997 and H.R. 274. I was also a leading supporter and sponsor of the Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 1990, which are all laws of tremendous importance to persons with autism.

And in 1993, as Chairman of the House Commerce Subcommittee on Health and Environment, I was the lead sponsor of the NIH Revitalization Act, which reauthorized, expanded funding for, and strengthened NIH research into autism and child health.

I have also been very concerned about reducing public exposure to mercury. For example, last year I introduced the Clean Smokestacks Act (H.R. 2900) to reduce emissions of methyl mercury from powerplants by 90%. As a National Academy of Sciences report confirmed only last week, these emissions pose a significant health threat and must be reduced. Methyl mercury contamination has caused 40 states to issue warnings about fish consumption. Human exposure through eating

contaminated fish can cause numerous adverse health effects, such as losses of sensory or cognitive ability, delays in developmental milestones, birth defects, tremors, convulsions, and even death.

Currently, my legislation to reduce mercury emissions has over 100 bipartisan cosponsors.

For the last two Congresses, I have also introduced bipartisan legislation to require better public disclosure of mercury pollution. This legislation also has over 100 bipartisan cosponsors.

I point this out to illustrate that I take the issue of mercury very seriously. Where we have a reasonable basis for taking action, I believe that the Congress and the agencies should expeditiously work to protect the public health from mercury exposure.

For this reason, I strongly support the efforts by FDA to eliminate the use of thimerosal in vaccines. Thimerosal is a preservative that contains ethyl mercury. Although less is known about the effects of ethyl mercury in thimerosal than about the effects of methyl mercury from powerplant emissions, ethyl mercury may pose similar health risks. It is appropriate, therefore, that thimerosal be phased out of vaccines.

This process is well underway. The maximum exposure to mercury through vaccines today is 60% of what it was a year ago. The entire childhood immunization schedule is currently available without thimerosal, and FDA expects all vaccines to be thimerosal-free by the first quarter of next year.

The question this hearing poses, however, is not whether mercury-containing thimerosal should be in vaccines in the United States. FDA decided a year ago that it should not. Rather, the purpose of this hearing appears to be to publicize the theory that thimerosal is causing autism.

The evidence to support this theory is virtually nonexistent. I fear that once again we are pursuing an anti-vaccine agenda in disregard for the scientific and medical consensus on the safety of vaccines.

The Chairman has held a series of hearings questioning vaccine safety, the public health benefits of childhood immunizations, and the integrity of the scientists, health professionals, and public servants working to immunize our children. The Chairman has promoted allegations that the MMR vaccine causes autism. He has provided a forum for allegations that vaccines can cause diabetes. And he has alleged that parents should be skeptical about vaccines because our government is beholden to the drug industry.

This is a backwards attitude to take at a time when vaccines promise more than ever to improve human health.

I look forward to the testimony today, and I especially want to thank the parents who are testifying today. It takes a lot of courage to share your personal experiences with Congress.