

STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE HENRY A. WAXMAN
Ranking Minority Member
April 6, 2000

I am glad we are having this hearing today on autism. We still have many questions about autism: What causes it? What are the safest and most effective treatments? Is there any way to prevent it? How many people in the country suffer from autism?

We do know some things about autism. We know that there is a genetic component to autism. There have been some dramatic discoveries recently in the genetics of autism, like the discovery of the Fragile X gene and the gene that causes Rett's syndrome. We know that autism most likely develops very early during fetal development.

And we also know that parents are not to blame for autism. We have come a long way from the day when fathers and mothers were led to believe they had done something to cause their children's autism, leaving them with needless and destructive guilt.

But I also understand that this hearing was called to consider a theory that certain vaccines cause autism. From my discussions with medical experts, scientists, and the autism community, it is clear that this is only a theory. As the American Medical Association concluded recently, "Scientific data does not support a causal association between vaccination and autism."

I believe we need to increase our efforts to understand the causes of autism. In this search, no possible cause -- including vaccines -- should be off the table. That's why I am a co-sponsor of H.R. 3301, which would provide additional funding at NIH for research into what causes autism, how many people suffer from autism, and how best to treat those who do have autism.

But in this process, we must not get ahead of the science or raise false alarms.

At every hearing held this Congress by this Committee which has touched on childhood immunization, I have made a point of emphasizing the tremendous public health value of immunization. More Americans have been saved by vaccines than by any other medical intervention. Across the globe, two and a half million children die every year from childhood diseases. Another 750,000 are crippled by these diseases. But American children are shielded from this death and misery by their vaccinations.

During my 25-year career in Congress, my focus has been improving health care, especially for children. When I was Chairman of the Health and the Environment Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee from 1979 to 1994, we worked constantly to expand NIH research into childhood diseases. And I have continued to fight for more research, better treatments, and coverage since I have been in the minority. During countless hearings and many legislative battles, I heard over and over again about the pain of parents whose children suffer from debilitating diseases.

So I sympathize with the parents who are here today. I know how painful and hard it can be for a parent to have a child who appears to be developing normally and then, all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, stops communicating and stops developing.

We need to do everything we can to give these parents answers. There is still much to learn.

In medicine, 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. If research has been conducted with control groups, and the results have been independently validated, then that gives parents meaningful information about what causes a disease or a condition, and what the best treatments are. Parents need the best possible information so that they can make the best possible decisions regarding their children's health.

There were lots of experts and groups that are knowledgeable about this but were not invited to testify today. These groups include: Dr. Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of HHS and current president of the Morehouse School of Medicine; Dr. Isabelle Rapin from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine; the American Public Health Association; the American Medical Association; and the National Network for Immunization Information. At this time I ask that all their statements be entered into the record.

I thank the witnesses for appearing today and I look forward to their testimony.