What the News Isn't Saying about Vaccine-Autism Studies

Written by Sharyl Attkisson

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When a new study finds no link between vaccines and autism, it instantly makes headlines on TV news and popular media everywhere. It is billed as the final word, "once again" disproving the notion that vaccines could have anything to do with autism. What you don't learn on the news is the self-interest and financial ties behind the studies. In one recent case, the consulting firm behind the study listed a major vaccine maker among its clients: The Lewin Group.
Journal of Medicine; the study authors simply declare “The Lewin Group operates with editorial independence.” (As an aside, according to OpenSecrets.org, The Lewin Group’s parent company, UnitedHealth Group, is a key government partner in Obamacare. Its subsidiary QSSI was given the contract to build the federal government’s HealthCare.gov website. One of its top executives and his family are top Obama donors.)

Conflicts of interest alone do not invalidate a study. But they serve as important context in the relentless effort by pharmaceutical interests and their government partners to discredit the many scientists and studies that have found possible vaccine-autism links.

Many Studies Suggest Links

When the popular press, bloggers and medical pundits uncritically promote a study like The Lewin Group’s, it must confound researchers like Lucija Tomljenovic, Catherine DeSoto, Robert Hitlan, Christopher Shaw, Helen Ratajczak, Boyd Haley, Carolyn Gallagher, Melody Goodman, M.I. Kawashti, O.R. Amin, N.G. Rowehy, T. Minami, Laura Hewitson, Brian Lopresti, Carol Stott, Scott Mason, Jaime Tomko, Bernard Rimland, Woody McGinnis, K. Shandley and D.W. Austin.

They are just a few of the many scientists whose peerreviewed, published works have found possible links between vaccines and autism. But unlike The Lewin Group’s study, their research has not been endorsed and promoted by the government and, therefore, has not been widely reported in the media. In fact, news reports, blogs and “medical experts” routinely claim no such studies exist.

To be clear: No study to date conclusively proves or disproves a causal link between vaccines and autism and—despite the misreporting—none has claimed to do so. Each typically finds either (a) no association, or (b) a possible association on a narrow vaccine-autism question. Taken as a whole, the research on both sides serves as a body of evidence.

The Astroturf Propaganda Campaign

It’s theoretically possible that all of the studies supporting a possible link between vaccines and autism are wrong. And, if the propagandists are to be believed, each of the researchers is an incompetent crank, quack, nut or fraud (and, of course, “anti-vaccine” for daring to dabble in research that attempts to solve the autism puzzle and leads to vaccine safety issues). The
scientists and their research are “controversial,” simply because the propagandists declare them to be.

The disparaged scientists include well-published neurologists, pharmacists, epidemiologists, immunologists, Ph.D.s, chemists and microbiologists from places like Boston Children’s Hospital, Horizon Molecular Medicine at Georgia State University, University of British Columbia, City College of New York, Columbia University, Stony Brook University Medical Center, University of Northern Iowa, University of Michigan, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Arkansas Children’s Hospital Research Institute, Al Azhar University of Cairo, Kinki University in Japan, the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Poland, Department of Child Health Care, Children’s Hospital of Fudan University in China, Utah State University and many more.

Their work is, at best, ignored by the media; at worst, it’s viciously attacked by the predictable flock of self-appointed expert “science” bloggers who often title their blogs with the word “science” or “skeptics” to confer an air of legitimacy.

This astroturf movement, in my opinion, includes but is not limited to: Left Brain Right Brain, Science Blogs, Neuro Skeptic, Science Based Medicine, Liz Ditz, Crooks and Liars, Respectful Insolence, Health News Review, Skeptical Raptor, Skeptic blog, Skeptics.com, Wired, Brian Deer, Seth Mnookin, Orac, Every Child by Two, the vaccine industry–supported American Academy of Pediatrics, and the government/corporate–funded American Council on Science and Health.

This circle operates with the moral support of the vaccine industry and its government partners, citing one another’s flawed critiques as supposed proof that each study has been “debunked,” although the studies continue to appear in peer-reviewed, published journals and in the government’s own National Institutes of Health library.

“Weak,” “too small,” “haphazard,” “not replicated,” “junk science,” “flawed,” “unrelated,” declare the propagandists, without exception. Just as attackers spent years challenging any study that linked tobacco to lung cancer.
They know that reporters who don’t do their homework will conduct an Internet search, run across the blogs with science-y sounding names, and uncritically accept their word as if it’s fact and prevailing thought.

A Small Sampling

Many of the studies have common themes regarding a subset of susceptible children with immunity issues who, when faced with various vaccine challenges, end up with brain damage described as autism.

“Permanent brain damage” is an acknowledged, rare side effect of vaccines; there’s no dispute in that arena. The question is whether the specific form of autism brain injury after vaccination is in any way related to vaccination.

So what are a few of these published studies supporting a possible link between vaccines and autism?

As far back as 1998, a serology study by the College of Pharmacy at University of Michigan supported the hypothesis that an autoimmune response from the live measles virus in MMR vaccine “may play a causal role in autism.” (Nothing to see here, say the critics, that study is old.)

In 2002, a Utah State University study found that “an inappropriate antibody response to MMR [vaccine], specifically the measles component thereof, might be related to pathogenesis of autism.” (“Flawed and nonreplicable,” insist the propagandists.)

Also in 2002, the Autism Research Institute in San Diego looked at a combination of vaccine factors. Scientists found the mercury preservative thimerosal used in some vaccines (such as flu shots) could depress a baby’s immunity. That could make him susceptible to chronic measles infection of the gut when he gets MMR vaccine, which contains live measles virus. (The bloggers say it’s an old study, and that other studies contradict it.)
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In 2006, a team of microbiologists in Cairo, Egypt concluded, “deficient immune response to measles, mumps and rubella vaccine antigens might be associated with autism, as a leading cause or a resulting event.”

A 2007 study found statistically significant evidence suggesting that boys who got the triple series Hepatitis B vaccine when it contained thimerosal were “more susceptible to developmental disability” than unvaccinated boys.

Similarly, a 5-year study of 79,000 children by the same institution found boys given Hepatitis B vaccine at birth had a three times increased risk for autism than boys vaccinated later or not at all. Nonwhite boys were at greatest risk. (“Weak study,” say the critics.)

A 2009 study in the Journal of Child Neurology found a major flaw in a widely-cited study that claimed no link between thimerosal in vaccines and autism. Their analysis found that “the original p value was in error and that a significant relation does exist between the blood levels of mercury and diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder.”

The researchers noted, “Like the link between aspirin and heart attack, even a small effect can have major health implications. If there is any link between autism and mercury, it is absolutely crucial that the first reports of the question are not falsely stating that no link occurs.” (Critics: the study is not to be believed.)

A 2010 rat study by the Polish Academy of Sciences suggested “likely involvement” of thimerosal in vaccines (such as flu shots) “in neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism.” (The critics dismiss rat studies.)

In 2010, a pilot study in Acta Neurobiologiae Experimentalis found that infant monkeys given the 1990s’ recommended pediatric vaccine regimen showed important brain changes warranting “additional research into the potential impact of an interaction between the MMR and thimerosal-containing vaccines on brain structure and function.”

A study from Japan’s Kinki University in 2010 supported “the possible biological plausibility for
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how lowdose exposure to mercury from thimerosal-containing vaccines may be associated with autism.”

A 2011 study from Australia’s Swinburne University supported the hypothesis that sensitivity to mercury, such as thimerosal in flu shots, may be a genetic risk factor for autism. (Critics call the study “strange” with “logical hurdles.”)

A Journal of Immunotoxicology review in 2011 by a former pharmaceutical company senior scientist concluded autism could result from more than one cause including encephalitis (brain damage) following vaccination. (Critics say she reviewed “debunked and fringe” science.)

In 2011, City University of New York correlated autism prevalence with increased childhood vaccine uptake. “Although mercury has been removed from many vaccines, other culprits may link vaccines to autism,” said the study’s lead author. (To critics, it’s “junk science.”)

A University of British Columbia study in 2011 that found “the correlation between aluminum [an adjuvant] in vaccines and [autism] may be causal.” (More “junk science,” say the propagandists.)

A 2011 rat study out of Warsaw, Poland, found thimerosal in vaccines given at a young age could contribute to neurodevelopmental disorders. (Proves nothing, say critics.)

A Chinese study in 2012 suggested that febrile seizures (an acknowledged side effect of some vaccines) and family history of neuropsychiatric disorders correlate with autistic regression.

A 2012 study from the Neurochemistry Research Marie Curie Chairs Program in Poland found
that newborn exposure to vaccines with thimerosal (such as flu shots) might cause gluten-related brain injuries.

In 2013, neurosurgeons at the Methodist Neurological Institute found that children with mild mitochondrial defect may be highly susceptible to toxins like the vaccine preservative thimerosal found in vaccines such as flu shots. (“Too small” of a study, say the critics.)

Then, there’s a 2004 Columbia University study presented at the Institute of Medicine. It found that mice predisposed for genetic autoimmune disorder developed autistic-like behavior after receiving mercury-containing vaccines. (Critics say that’s not proof, and the work was not replicable.)

There’s Dr. William Thompson, the current CDC senior scientist, who has come forward with an extraordinary statement to say that he and his agency have engaged in long-term efforts to obscure a study’s significant link between vaccines and autism, heightened in African-American boys. (The CDC says the data changes made were for legitimate reasons.)

There’s the current CDC immunization safety director who acknowledged to me that it’s possible vaccines may rarely trigger autism in children who are biologically or genetically susceptible to vaccine injury.

There’s the case of Hannah Poling, in which the government secretly admitted multiple vaccines given in one day triggered her brain injuries, including autism, then paid a multi-million dollar settlement, and had the case sealed from the prying public eyes under a confidentiality order.

There was the former head of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Bernadine Healy, who stoked her peers’ ire by publicly stating that the vaccine-autism link was not a “myth” as so many tried to claim. She disclosed that her colleagues at the Institute of Medicine did not wish to investigate the possible link because they feared the impact it would have on the vaccination program.

There’s former CDC researcher Poul Thorsen, whose studies dispelled a vaccine-autism link.
He’s now a “most wanted fugitive” after being charged with 13 counts of wire fraud and nine counts of money laundering for allegedly using CDC grants of tax dollars to buy a house and cars for himself.

And there are the former scientists from Merck, maker of the MMR vaccine in question, who have turned into whistleblowers and accuse their company of committing vaccine fraud.

The Spin

If you want to review research and evidence on the other side, a simple Internet search will easily turn up everything you want to know. Those studies always seem to get covered in the news. They somehow turn up first in Google search results, along with the reports and blogs disparaging all opposing science and news reporting.

You might run across a February article in The New York Times. It treated the vaccine autism theory as if it comes down to a disagreement between emotionally fragile parents of autistic children and real research: “faith” and “feeling” versus hard science.

“So some parents feel certain that vaccines can lead to autism,” stated the article, and “the vaccine-autism link has continued to be accepted on faith by some.”

You might run across this network news story that uses Dr. Paul Offit as an expert on vaccine safety. He’s introduced as “director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia” and he “denies a connection with vaccination and autism.”

Somehow, it goes unreported that Offit has made millions (he won’t disclose exactly how much) inventing a vaccine for Merck, which makes the MMR vaccine in question. Offit’s rotavirus vaccine has, itself, been the subject of safety concerns. And his employment at Children’s Hospital has been funded in part by $1.5 million given by Merck. In addition, he got caught giving false and disparaging information regarding a report I did exposing his financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry he so vigorously defends. His false statements were corrected by the publication that originally reported them. Offit and his book publisher settled a libel accusation by a vaccine safety advocate who accused Offit of fabricating a disparaging conversation in his
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But to the news, none of that matters. Offit is simply presented as an unbiased expert.

The supposed best medical experts in the world who deny vaccines have anything to do with autism remain at an utter loss to explain this generation's epidemic. To declare the science "settled" and the debate "over" is to defy the plain fact that many scientists worldwide are still sorting through it, and millions of people are still debating it.

The body of evidence on both sides is open to interpretation. People have every right to disbelieve the studies on one side. But it is disingenuous to pretend they do not exist.

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