



LAWSUIT ALLEGES VACCINE CAUSED AUTISM IN CHILDREN

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Lawyers representing some 5,000 parents of autistic children began making their case that the makers of vaccines administered during the first months of their child's life caused a neurological disorder.

The parents, in a class action lawsuit that went to court this month, claim that thimerosal, a preservative added to vaccines that contains the toxic chemical mercury, caused their children to develop autism. Thimerosal is present most notably in the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine that children are required to receive in many states before starting kindergarten.

Although several major scientific studies have found no connection between thimerosal and autism, the parents filing the suit point to the sharp rise in the number of autism diagnoses over the past decade and insist the increase is a direct result of mercury-laced vaccinations.

The proceedings are taking place in the "federal vaccine court," a court designed to adjudicate cases against vaccine makers while protecting the industry from bankruptcy. If the court rules that thimerosal can cause autism, any money awarded to the families will come from a government fund.

Many of the parents' cases have been awaiting trial for almost five years. The court is in the process of hearing nine test cases that will determine the precedent for the thousands of parents who filed suit against the vaccine makers.

What is autism?

According to the National Institute of Health, autism is a condition affecting the body's nervous system that can impair thinking, feeling, communication skills and social interaction.

A person suffering from autism is often said to live in his or her own world, unable to recognize and relate to other people.

The condition affects each person differently. There is no typical autistic person; rather, there is a range of symptoms known as the autism spectrum. Someone on the low end of the spectrum may be able to speak but lack normal social behaviors while those suffering a more acute form of the disease may be completely nonverbal.

Autism is typically diagnosed between the ages of 3 and 4. There is no medicine or treatment that can cure autism.

The reasons for a link

A growing number of parents blamed their children's autism on thimerosal, convinced that the spike in autism diagnoses was due to something other than genetics.

To argue their case, the parents cited studies that showed autism levels in the United States rose from one in every 10,000 births in the 1980s to one in every 166 births in 2003, according to the New York Times.

The parents also said infants began receiving higher doses of thimerosal in 1991 when several new shots containing the preservative, including a hepatitis B vaccine, were administered along with the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. They contended the total amount of mercury present in the combination of vaccines exceeded government regulations.

Republican Representative Dan Burton of Indiana, who lobbied for a thimerosal ban from vaccines, told the New York Times, "My grandson received nine shots in one day, seven of which contained thimerosal, which is 50 percent mercury as you know, and he became autistic a short time later."

A lack of scientific proof

Many pediatricians, scientists and some parents refute the idea that thimerosal can cause autism. All major scientific studies have so far disproved the theory, including a comprehensive study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in 2003 that analyzed over 125,000 children born between 1991 and 1999.

Scientists also say the level of harmful mercury in each shot is minimal, equaling the amount found in a tuna fish sandwich.

Skeptics of the autism-thimerosal connection believe the rise in the number of autism diagnoses is predominantly due to social factors.

The autism spectrum has expanded over the past 20 years and today encompasses a much greater range of affected people, particularly those with only mild forms of the syndrome. Children who may once have been labeled either "mentally retarded" or "learning disabled" are now classified as autistic, the San Francisco Chronicle reported. Such classification usually qualifies the student for financial aid, as well as special education assistance.

Pediatricians, meanwhile, stress the importance of infant immunizations to eliminate many types of diseases.

"We need a war on autism, not a war on childhood vaccines," Dr. Peter Hotez, a vaccine researcher at George Washington University and father of an autistic daughter, told the New York Times.

Courtroom action

The vaccine court is charged with determining whether a link between autism and thimerosal exists. If it decides in favor of the nearly 5,000 families, a settlement worth millions of dollars is likely.

To rule in favor of the parents, the court only needs to find "a link between autism and the shots is more likely than not," and does not require scientific proof, according to the Associated Press.

The court is expected to finish hearing the nine test cases by the end of June. These nine cases will set precedents for thousands of similar cases.

Any decision will have little bearing on vaccines currently administered to children, as thimerosal was removed from vaccines in 1999. Although critics of the vaccine believe the decision came too late, government health agencies, pediatricians and researchers say the vaccines were always safe, explaining that autism rates remain just as high today.

-- *Compiled by Brian Mason for NewsHour Extra*

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