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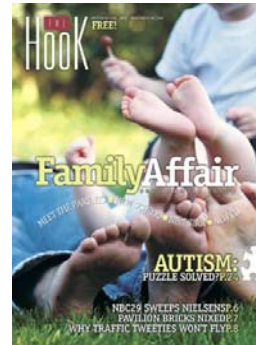
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COVER- Generation Hg? Is Autism puzzle solved?

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She was a beautiful baby with her mother's eyes. Daddy was there with the video camera when she took her first steps. She loved to play tickle monster.

She was about 18 months old when she stopped smiling and stopped talking. She didn't want to play anymore. She stopped looking at people. She started waking up in the middle of the night and screaming for hours.

The pediatrician told the parents they were worrying for no reason. He said every child is different. He said, "Let's wait and see."

By the time she was two, she had chronic diarrhea and drooled uncontrollably. She walked on her toes, flapped her hands, and spent much of her time staring into the middle distance.

The distraught parents rushed her from one doctor to another, begging for an explanation. An answer finally came:

Your child has autism. It's a genetic brain disorder. We don't know what causes it, and there is no cure. Forty hours a week of therapy might make her behavior more acceptable, but it's not going to "cure" her. You need to start looking at institutions now because the good ones have long waiting lists.

The doctor sent the parents home with a video, and they sobbed as they watched children like their own daughter rocking, flapping their hands, and screaming. The narrator said, "We all have great dreams for our children. With the diagnosis of autism, the dream dies."

Thousands of Virginia families and millions worldwide are living through similar versions of the autism nightmare.

Lanier Rossignol, a Charlottesville mother of two young boys diagnosed with autism, recalls a similar experience with her first son.

"By the time he was 10 months old," says Rossignol, "he never looked at me, never responded to his name, and he was obsessed with spinning objects. I knew something was wrong, but no one believed me. Everyone said, 'He's fine, you're just imagining things.'"

Seven months later, her son was diagnosed with autism.

Rossignol describes how her second boy "totally regressed" when he was six months old. "He stopped responding to his name," she says. "He started hand-flapping."

Twenty years ago, autism affected fewer than one in 2,000 children; now the Centers for Disease Control estimates it's one in every 166. But just as the numbers of cases are growing, so is skepticism that it's a *genetic* disorder.

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. 'I don't quite understand you,' she said, as politely as she could. from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

"Mad as a hatter"-- the phrase originated not in Lewis Carroll's story, but in a psychiatric illness common among 19th-century hat makers that became known as Hatter's Disease.

Physicians were baffled throughout the first half of the 20th century when they were confronted with an epidemic of sick babies suffering from skin rashes, poor circulation, and respiratory distress. Thousands of babies died. The illness became known as Pink Disease because the fingertips, toes,

and nose turn pink.

In the mid-1950s, in a fishing village on Minamata Bay, Japan, cats started shaking and inexplicably jumping into the bay. Then the villagers got terribly sick. Some died. Babies were born with mental retardation, uncontrolled tremors, and permanent palsy. Before mercury dumped by a nearby factory was pegged as the culprit, doctors dubbed it Minamata Disease.

Hatter's, Pink, Minamata, Barometer Maker's Disease-- no matter what doctors labeled the disorders, each was later conclusively found to be mercury poisoning.

"There are doctors out there telling parents they need to accept this, that there's nothing they can do. Do not listen to whoever tells you that! They are talking out of ignorance."-- Amanda Slim, a Charlottesville-area mother of a six-year-old child diagnosed with autism

Slim is among the growing numbers of people who believe that mercury, well known as among the most neurotoxic substances on the planet, is the culprit in autism.

To chemists, Mercury is "Hg," the only metal that is liquid at room temperature. That seemingly playful property earned it the moniker "quicksilver" from ancient Greeks. But inside the body, its effects are insidious.

Hundreds of times more toxic than lead, mercury wrecks the immune system and can serve as the spark that leads to a blazing spectrum of physical and psychiatric symptoms-- some of which take months to manifest.

"If what I write in the book is all true, we have just experienced one of the largest medical catastrophes of our time, putting a generation of American children at terrible risk with possibly devastating results" says David Kirby, author of *Evidence of Harm, Mercury in Vaccines and the Autism Epidemic: A Medical Controversy*, released in March by St. Martin's Press. (Kirby, a health/science contributor to the *New York Times*, will be speaking in Charlottesville later this month.)

Kirby's not alone in asking whether autism is a misdiagnosis for mercury poisoning. An increasing number of families, physicians, scientists, and some in Congress point to a growing body of evidence linking mercury toxicity with otherwise unexplained disorders like autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADD, ADHD, and a host of escalating illnesses that afflict today's children in great numbers.

"Autism, Asperger's, PDD, ADD, ADHD, all of that stuff I think it's all the same thing," says Nell Goddin, a Charlottesville

mother of a child diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. "Until we get to a point where the labels are something other than subjective behavioral descriptions, that isn't science. That's just spinning your wheels."

The fact is that unprecedented concentrations of mercury were injected into children via vaccines beginning in the late 1980s. And the symptoms of mercury toxicity and autism are nearly identical.

Intriguingly, according to Kirby's book, autism rates began falling in California in 2004 after the removal of mercury compounds from vaccines. And many parents of children already suffering with autism are celebrating the fact that a growing number of children diagnosed early are making progress undreamed of a decade ago through "heavy metal chelation," a therapy that binds a sulphur compound with heavy metals such as mercury to flush them from the body. While chelation can be dangerous, many parents swear by it and are telling the world that the mysterious puzzle of autism has been solved.

Yet there are powerful forces who aren't about to swallow that pill. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the CDC, the Institutes of Medicine, the entire pharmaceutical industry, its lobbyists, and influential allies in Washington-- virtually the entire medical establishment-- stand united in opposition to the theory that mercury toxicity has something to do with autism.

"I believe that my grandson became autistic at least in part because he received vaccinations. He received nine in one day, and six of those contained mercury. He acted like any other normal child. Yet within one week he was running around flapping his arms, walking on his toes, banging his head against the wall, and he could not speak clearly anymore." Congressman Dan Burton, 2001

Mercury has been in vaccines since the 1930s in the form of a preservative called Thimerosal, which is 49.6 percent ethylmercury. In the early 1990s Thimerosal was banned from animal vaccines because it was too toxic. In 1998, it was removed from over-the-counter products because of safety concerns.

"Current scientific evidence does not support the theory that vaccines have caused autism," the American Academy of Pediatrics announced in 2003.

And yet that same year, the U.S. House Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness wrote, "Thimerosal used as a preservative in vaccines is likely related to the autism epidemic. This epidemic in all probability may have been prevented or curtailed had the FDA not been asleep at the

switch regarding injected Thimerosal and the sharp rise of infant exposure to this known neurotoxin."

Thimerosal is still legal for and widely used in vaccines and flu shots. But it is hardly the only way for mercury to get into human bodies.

It's in our teeth. A so-called "silver" filling is at least 50 percent mercury, purportedly enough to pollute a 10-acre lake. Some studies suggest mercury vapor enters the bloodstream every time we chew or grind our teeth.

It's in the air. The EPA estimates that the nation's 1,100 coal-burning power plants spew 50 tons of mercury each year.

It collects in the water, builds up in fish (as it did in Minamata, Japan), and becomes more concentrated as it moves up the food supply.

It's in breast milk. According to the CDC, one in 12 childbearing women "already has unsafe blood levels of mercury," enough to cause neurological damage in her unborn children.

When her six-month-old began exhibiting many of the autistic symptoms that his older brother had, Rossignol had her breast milk tested. She discovered that her baby was getting 10 times the EPA daily limit of mercury.

Generation Mercury was born in 1988, the year Dustin Hoffman's *Rain Man* made autism a household word (even though the character Hoffman played also had Savant Syndrome, a rare and separate disorder). That was also the year that, beginning with the Hib vaccine, several new shots were added to the vaccine schedule.

Over the next few years, the number of vaccinations recommended for children under the age of two went from 8 to 20. The amount of ethylmercury injected into the bloodstreams of babies and toddlers jumped 246 percent. Within the first six months of life, a baby received 187.5 micrograms of ethylmercury, far beyond EPA safety limits. And infants don't produce the bile necessary to excrete mercury from their bodies.

It was not until 1999 that the American Academy of Pediatrics, the CDC, the FDA, and the National Institutes of Health issued a joint statement "urging" vaccine manufacturers to remove Thimerosal. Despite an agreement to phase Thimerosal out of vaccines for children, existing stocks of Thimerosal-laced vaccines could still remain on shelves.

Thimerosal is still present in most flu shots. It is used in the

manufacturing process of a variety of pharmaceutical products. And vaccines currently being shipped overseas have high concentrations of Thimerosal.

Receiving the Hib vaccine with Thimerosal on the first day of birth is the equivalent of a 200-pound adult male consuming 1,400 cans of tuna in a single day. The analogy is not exactly fair unless the adult male stops producing enough bile to excrete the mercury. Generationrescue.org

Dr. Neal Halsey was in charge of the vaccine program at the American Academy of Pediatrics from 1995 to 1999. When asked about the mercury that babies received under his watch, he told a reporter, "My first reaction was simply disbelief... what I believed, and what everybody else believed, was that [mercury] was truly a trace, a biologically insignificant amount. My honest belief is that if the labels had had the mercury content in micrograms, this would have been uncovered years ago. But the fact is, no one did the calculation."

Someone evidently did. A 1991 Merck memo obtained by the *LA Times* warned that six-month-old children would get a mercury dose up to 87 times higher than the maximum daily consumption of mercury from fish. But whoever wrote it-- and whoever read it-- kept quiet.

Over the decade that followed, the rate of autism shot up 1000 percent nationwide.

"The injection of Thimerosal into expectant mothers and newborn infants represents without a doubt a severe, major toxic exposure and is most likely causal in autism spectrum disorders." Boyd Haley, Professor and Chair, Department of Chemistry, University of Kentucky, 2002

Dr. Susan Anderson is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Virginia and director of the autism program at the Kluge Children's Rehabilitation Center. Does she believe autism is a misdiagnosis for mercury poisoning?

"I think not," she says. "If it was, then we would be seeing a lot more of it than we do. I mean, everybody got the immunizations."

Like the majority of her colleagues, Anderson believes that autism is a genetic condition that causes a disorder in brain neurochemistry and not a manifestation of heavy metal toxicity-- and that it has nothing to do with vaccines. As Anderson puts it, "Tying [the increase in autism] to the change in the vaccine schedule is wrong."

Dr. Anderson, like most pediatricians, does not see an epidemic of autism. Genetic epidemics are, after all, a

scientific impossibility. While she agrees that the numbers of children diagnosed with autism, Asperger's, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), have climbed (an increase of 726 percent in Virginia between 1990 and 2003), she attributes most of that to better diagnostic tools.

Dr. Mary Megson disagrees. A Richmond-based developmental pediatrician, Megson specializes in biomedical approaches to the treatment of autism.

"Are we just better at diagnosing [autism]?" Megson asks. "Well, you don't miss a child who's been talking and then becomes nonverbal, flaps, paces, and doesn't look you in the eye."

For most pediatricians, the fact that autism shares over 100 symptoms and characteristics with mercury poisoning [see *sidebar*], the fact that its incidence has increased among American children as the mercury load in vaccines has gone up, and the fact that autism was not diagnosed in the U.S. until after mercury was added to vaccines in the 1930s, are all unfortunate coincidences.

They form a regrettable pattern that has led many desperate parents and some in the medical community to draw hyperbolic conclusions that can't be substantiated with, in Anderson's words, "convincing, evidence-based research."

Dr. Elizabeth Mumper is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Family Medicine at the University of Virginia and president of Advocates for Children, a pediatric clinic in Lynchburg. Mumper believes the evidence supports a connection between mercury and autism. "I have seen a bibliography of well over a thousand articles looking at Thimerosal and showing the various ways in which it's harmful," she says. "The evidence is there-- good, reliable scientific evidence. Getting physicians to look at it is another story."

Mumper regrets that few of her colleagues share her belief in the connection between autism and mercury exposure. "I've made very little inroads with my mainstream colleagues because I have not been very successful at getting them to come to meetings," says Mumper, who is speaking at one such meeting April 30. [See *sidebar*]

Another local physician familiar with autism who asked not to be identified in this article says, "The research is there. But [physicians] won't take the time to look at it. These kids have been poisoned. I think pediatricians have been in denial for a long time. And they're in denial because they are too horrified at the possibility.

"We're looking at a generation of babies who've been

poisoned due to negligence and incompetence. I can't be more clear about this: there is no hope for a child with autism today in mainstream medicine. Twenty years from now, the fact that we even debated [the autism/mercury link] will be ludicrous."

Results of one powerful study were published last month. Led by Raymond F. Palmer of the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, the study, forthcoming in the quarterly *Health and Place*, found an association between rates of autism and mercury pollution. Every 1000 pounds of environmentally released mercury corresponded to a 61 percent increase in the rate of autism, the study showed.

While the CDC, the FDA, and the American Academy of Pediatrics concede that babies and children vaccinated in the late 1980s and throughout the '90s were exposed to cumulative mercury levels far beyond what is considered safe, they still maintain that a connection between concentrations of mercury in vaccines and the epidemic rates of autism among America's youngest generation cannot be proved.

In other words, according to this logic, there's no proof excessive mercury exposure can cause the symptoms of mercury poisoning.

*The authors live in Albemarle County. They have a three-year-old child diagnosed with autism who has made dramatic improvements following chelation and biomedical treatments. Bell is an assistant professor of anthropology at Washington and Lee University. Barefoot's books include *The Corner: A History of Student Life at the University of Virginia* and *Thomas Jefferson on Leadership*.*

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SIDEBAR- Autism Awareness Month noted locally

April 14-15, Thursday and Friday, Cavalier Inn

"Behavioral Approaches to the Education of Children with Autism," conference sponsored by the Virginia Institute of Autism. 923-8252 viaschool.org

April 19, Tuesday, New Dominion Bookshop, 5:30pm

New York Times Science/Health contributor David Kirby discusses his new book, *Evidence of Harm: Mercury in Vaccines and the Autism Epidemic: A Medical Controversy*. evidenceofharm.com

April 30, Saturday, Omni Hotel, 8:30am-4:45pm

"Recent Advances in the Biology of Autism," conference

sponsored by the Virginia chapter of the National Autism Association. Speakers include Drs. Andrew Wakefield, Jeffrey Bradstreet, Sandra Jill James, and Elizabeth Mumper. 977-4198 naa-va.org

SIDEBAR- Evidence or coincidence?

Some of the over 100 symptoms and characteristics shared by both mercury poisoning and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Social withdrawal

Lack of eye contact

Delayed language use

Loss of speech

Hand flapping

Rocking

Toe walking

Anxiety and Irrational fears

Hypersalivation

Hypersensitivity to light, noise, touch

Uncoordination, poor motor skills

Head banging

Staring spells

Sleep difficulties

Visual impairment

Gastrointestinal disorders

Eczema, rashes

ADD and ADHD traits

*Source: "Autism: A Novel Form of Mercury Poisoning,"
Journal of Medical Hypotheses, April 2001*

SIDEBAR- Mercurial data

Thimerosal is 49.6 percent ethylmercury. Ethylmercury is many times more toxic than the organic mercury that permeates our environment.

Thimerosal was added to vaccines as a preservative beginning in the early 1930s and has been in use ever since.

Autism was first diagnosed in America around 1940.

In the 1990s, the number of vaccines mandated for American children under the age of two went from 8 to 20. The amount of ethylmercury received by children jumped 246 percent.

Since that time, the incidence rate of autism has shot up approximately 1000 percent nationwide. A child is diagnosed with autism every 20 minutes.

Rates have also skyrocketed for ADD, ADHD, speech delays, childhood diabetes, eczema, asthma, and allergies. According to the CDC, 1 in 6 children now has some type of developmental or behavioral disorder.

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Lanier Rossignol with her sons, 4-year-old Isaiah and almost-2 year old Joshua (both diagnosed with autism)



The 1972 *Life* magazine publication of this photograph

of a mother bathing her severely mercury-disabled teenage daughter woke up the world to what happened in Minamata, Japan.

W. EUGENE SMITH (1918-1978)



Julian Baumer



Nellie Goddin with family: Nellie Baumer (age 4), Julian Baumer (age 6), and Chris Baumer





David Kirby, longtime health/science contributor to the *New York Times*, speaks in Charlottesville April 19.

PHOTO COURTESY ST. MARTIN'S PRESS



Kathy Young, a resident of Albemarle County and president of the Virginia chapter of the National Autism Association, has a seven-year-old daughter diagnosed with autism. "When Anna was about 18-months old we began worrying about her speech delay. She was sick a lot too with ear infections. She had no eye contact. The doctors kept telling us the same thing: wait and see, wait and see. Two years later Anna was diagnosed with autism."

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