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## DO VACCINES CAUSE AUTISM?

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By Michael J Rosch

Do vaccines cause autism? No, they don't. The evidence is in and the scientific consensus has found that we probably have a better chance of discovering Barack Obama comes from Mars than discovering a connection between vaccines and autism. But like what we see with other conspiracy and denialist groups such as the Obama Birthers, a passionate, vocal minority refuses to accept the evidence no matter how compelling it is. And this minority has become a very real danger to the public health.

Vaccination originated with the observations of Edward Jenner concerning cowpox in the 1700s. And since then, vaccines have saved millions of lives as well as reduced child mortality and suffering around the world. Vaccines have rid the world of small pox and have eliminated polio from most of the globe. Today, an extraordinary body of medical literature exists that analyzes in painful detail the innumerable, carefully designed and carefully scrutinized studies that further validate vaccinations as one of the greatest medical breakthroughs in human history.

Moreover, numerous carefully designed and carefully scrutinized studies specifically investigated the hypothesis of a potential link between vaccines and autism. All of which showed not even a correlation, let alone evidence of causation. And the one study anyone took seriously that did show a correlation was the infamous Andrew Wakefield study from 1999. Since then, however, the study has been discredited, its conclusions have been retracted by ten of the paper's thirteen authors, and Wakefield himself has been exposed for allegedly altering the data in the study deliberately to get his desired conclusions.

Yet this vocal minority still touts this tiny and deeply flawed study as smoking gun proof of a link between vaccines and autism. And despite members of this group objecting in the media to being called anti-vaccine, it becomes immediately obvious that they are anti-vaccine to anyone who spends any time on their main websites. It is important though to mention that the anti-vaccination movement consists of a wide variety of beliefs that can range anywhere from innocent parental concerns based on a perceived controversy in the media to individuals who aggressively declare that vaccines are part of a long-running, evil government plot to poison the populous for mass eugenics purposes.

Now if there were any legitimate scientific basis for any of the main anti-vaccine arguments, this would indeed be a serious cause for concern, but not a single argument the leaders of this anti-vaccination movement make survives even the slightest bit of serious scrutiny. Their science is wrong. Their reasoning is wrong. Their arguments are riddled with the common logical fallacies made by Young Earth Creationists and Holocaust Deniers. And they prove time and time again that they have no interest in having their conclusions criticized, a major red flag and sign of crankery in the scientific community.

So after others failed to be able to reproduce Wakefield's findings and new studies found no link at all between MMR vaccines and autism, the anti-vaccinationists moved onto an ingredient not even in MMR vaccines, thimerosal, despite the fact that thimerosal consists of Ethylmercury, which does not bioaccumulate, and not its more toxic cousin Methylmercury, which does bioaccumulate. But anti-vaccinationists didn't let facts like thimerosal not bioaccumulating stop them from proclaiming that thimerosal causes autism through bioaccumulation. So they used political pressure to get thimerosal removed from most vaccines. Thimerosal was purged from most vaccines in Scandinavia and Canada in the 1990s, and from most U.S. vaccines in 2001. It remained in some flu vaccines because thimerosal makes an effective anti-fungal agent that gives the vaccines a longer shelf life. And flu shots are of course only recommended but not mandatory vaccines.

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Now you'd think that if thimerosal was the key ingredient in causing autism, that removing it from almost all vaccines would have a dramatic impact on reducing the rate of autism, right? Well, since the great U.S. thimerosal purge of 2001, the rate of autism in this country has only seemed to increase. Now whether we're seeing a true increase in autism or just an increase of diagnosis and awareness is still unclear. But what is clear is that the rate of autism most certainly has not decreased with the massive reduction of thimerosal in the U.S. Nor did it improve matters in Scandinavia, Canada, or anywhere else for that matter. In Denmark, they did a massive population study where they found that there was no meaningful difference in the rate of autism among the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

And in Robert Kennedy Jr.'s infamous truth-deprived article allegedly exposing the evil medical conspiracy to get us all, he even proudly cites the alleged removal of thimerosal from Russian vaccines over twenty years ago as if to argue that if the Russians removed it, they must have had a good reason. Of course, Kennedy is so delusional that he doesn't realize this claim works against his own argument. If we accept Kennedy's premise that Russia did remove their thimerosal over twenty years ago, then we should expect to see virtually no one under the age of twenty with autism in Russia. And of course, that's not even close to true. There's every reason to believe that autism is just as common in Russia as any other Western nation.

So with numerous epic failures to prove their hypotheses, you'd think the anti-vaccine community would finally accept they were wrong and abandon their presupposed conclusions. But no. While continuing to advocate against thimerosal, they've moved onto blaming the aluminum in vaccines and just the "toxins" in general contained in vaccines. And you can really tell they went out of their way to make up the scariest sounding stuff they could think of short of claiming that vaccines contained actual Nazis. Half the alleged "toxins" either aren't even in vaccines and were just shamelessly made up to scare people or are half truths misrepresented to seem scarier than they are. For instance, you'll often hear the claim that anti-freeze is in vaccines. It's not. You'll also often hear that Formaldehyde is in vaccines. It actually is in vaccines, but what they don't tell you is that there's more Formaldehyde in your body already than is contained in any vaccine. So if that really were a problem, you'd be in big trouble from the start.

Then there's the constant back peddling to a more humble position that anti-vaccinationists do when being interviewed by mainstream media. They throw out Orwellian buzz words like "Green Our Vaccines" and "Too Much Too Soon," none of which is based on anything resembling science. My favorite of their phrase they've invented is when they claim to be advocating for "Vaccine Choice," because of course this is a complete distraction from the complete lack of scientific evidence to support their claims by shamelessly changing the direction of the conversation to politics. Remarkably, people continue to fall for it despite how superbly this slimy tactic was broken down here in the film, "Thank You For Smoking":

*[Nick Naylor and his son arguing about ice cream]*

Joey: So, what happens when you're wrong?

Nick: Well, Joey, I'm never wrong.

Joey: But you can't always be right.

Nick: Well, if it's your job to be right, then you're never wrong.

Joey: But what if you are wrong?

Nick: Okay, let's say that you're defending chocolate and I'm defending vanilla. Now, if I were to say to you, "Vanilla's the best flavor ice cream", you'd say ...?

Joey: "No, chocolate is."

Nick: Exactly. But you can't win that argument. So, I'll ask you: So you think chocolate is the end-all and be-all of ice cream, do you?

Joey: It's the best ice cream; I wouldn't order any other.

Nick: Oh. So it's all chocolate for you, is it?

Joey: Yes, chocolate is all I need.

Nick: Well, I need more than chocolate. And for that matter, I need more than vanilla. I believe that we need freedom and choice when it comes to our ice cream, and that, Joey Naylor, that is the definition of liberty.

Joey: But that's not what we're talking about.

Nick: Ah, but that's what I'm talking about.

Joey: But ... you didn't prove that vanilla's the best.

Nick: I didn't have to. I proved that you're wrong, and if you're wrong, I'm right.

Joey: But you still didn't convince me.

Nick: Because I'm not after you. I'm after them.

Often those who lack evidence to support their ideologies will resort to the conspiracy theory. It's a convenient answer when the numbers just don't add up. It takes no real proof, and often the absence of proof is just proof it exists! They all just KNOW they have "The Truth" and are

uninterested in anything that might challenge that belief. Science, reason, and evidence don't matter, other than how they can be twisted to reach the desired conclusions, and any scientific evidence conflicting with that belief system must to them be the result of a coverup. This is also how cults operate.

Now I plan to specifically address how these anti-vaccine myths threaten the public health in a later article. But do vaccines carry risks? The answer is yes. But they're few and far between and the benefits far outweigh those risks. And most importantly, no good empirical evidence has been presented to the scientific community to prove that one of those risks was autism.

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