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## EDITORIAL

# Safer Vaccines for Children

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Newborns with parents who conscientiously follow their doctors' advice become virtual pincushions. Babies get pricked and jabbed with needles nearly two dozen times in the first 18 months of life to protect them against once-devastating diseases like measles, tetanus and hepatitis. Added to the list is a new recommendation for toddlers and pregnant women: flu shots. But few parents are likely to be aware that along with the flu vaccine, their kids might be getting injected with potentially dangerous amounts of mercury.

Drug makers have long added mercury-laced thimerosal to some vaccines to prevent bacterial growth. Mercury can cause neurological damage and learning problems, and many scientists worry about growing environmental exposures to it. There is a sharp and unresolved scientific debate over whether thimerosal in vaccines has contributed to a steep rise in reported autism cases.

Thimerosal is often added when vaccines are packaged in multi-dose containers because repeatedly piercing the vial's rubber stopper with a needle can introduce bacteria. Until five years ago, kids getting a full range of injections were often exposed to mercury levels well above Environmental Protection Agency guidelines.

But beginning in 1999, after requests from federal health officials and the Academy of Pediatrics, pharmaceutical manufacturers voluntarily switched to single-dose vials, which have only trace amounts of thimerosal, for most children's vaccines.

The problem arises again because of flu shots. The only maker of influenza vaccine for toddlers, Adventis Pasteur Inc., already markets its product in both single-dose, thimerosal-free vials as well as multi-dose packages that contain the preservative.

Assemblywoman Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills) has responded with a bill that would ban more than trace amounts of thimerosal in vaccines for children younger than 3 and pregnant women. Adventis opposes the bill, hinting that it might lead to vaccine shortages. To address this concern, Pavley amended her bill to allow thimerosal-containing vaccines to be used in the event of a public health emergency.

Iowa has passed a ban on thimerosal, and similar measures are pending in other states and Congress. AB 2943 passed the Assembly in May and could come before the full Senate by mid-August. Common sense and prudence argue for its passage.

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