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The Age of Autism: Heavy metal

By Dan Olmsted

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Washington, DC, May. 24 (UPI) -- Parents of autistic children Tuesday launched an organization called Generation Rescue based on their conviction that flushing mercury out of children's bodies improves and in some instances reverses autism.

"For parents who are on their backs with a foot on their neck trying to keep their lives together, we want to help them get to the truth as quickly as possible to help their kids. That is the single reason Generation Rescue exists," said co-founder J.B. Handley of San Francisco, father of a three-year-old, Jamison, who he says has been transformed by chelation (key-LAY-shun) therapy.

The technique involves using doctor-supervised pills or creams that induce excretion of mercury and other toxic metals. While chelation has been used for 40 years as a treatment for lead and other heavy metal poisoning, its impact on autism is unproven and highly controversial.

More controversial than the process, however, is what its adherents say it shows about the cause of autism.

"Through our own research and initiative we have discovered a truth that we feel every parent should know," states the group's Web site, generationrescue.org, which Handley said is funded exclusively by parent donations.

"Autism, Asperger's, ADD, ADHD ... other learning disabilities, and many auto-immune disorders including asthma, juvenile onset diabetes, and anaphylactic food allergies are all caused by and symptoms of mercury poisoning primarily induced by a vaccine preservative called thimerosal."

Thimerosal was used in an increasing number of childhood vaccines from 1931 through 1999, when the federal government recommended phasing it out. The increase in thimerosal follows the same curve as the rise in Autism Spectrum Disorders, which now affect 1 in every 166 U.S. children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Chelation proceeds on the assumption that because mercury is the problem, getting it out is a big part of the solution.

"The most dramatic effect is the two-way conversation and natural childlike play," Karen Beauvais of Atlanta told United Press International, speaking about her five-year-old son Josh after he underwent chelation. "Only the Mom of a once-silent autistic child could fully appreciate that. It is so nice to hear our little chatterbox talk now."

She said Josh had intestinal problems with an oral chelation compound but has made huge gains with a cream that "brings the chelator through the skin much like hormonal creams. It's great stuff."

"Many parents could benefit from chelation detox if it were mainstream treatment. Funny -- if your child is suffering from lead poisoning they are immediately chelated. But very few autistic children are even offered the option."

A thimerosal-autism link has been flatly rejected by most of the mainstream medical establishment, citing epidemiological studies. A year ago, the prestigious Institute of Medicine not only dismissed the idea but said it was so discredited that research money should go to more "promising" areas. While the IOM says overwhelming evidence shows no link between autism and thimerosal, the director of the CDC, Dr. Julie Gerberding, has told Congress she is keeping "an open mind" about that.

More recently, some clinical studies have suggested a link between autism and mercury. One study in rats found that a genetically susceptible strain developed autistic-like behavior when given thimerosal at a level proportional to childhood vaccines; another reported that many autistic children are low in glutathione, a key anti-oxidant for removing heavy metals from the body; and a Texas study found an association between higher levels of autism and higher exposure to environmental mercury.

Generation Rescue's Handley said his son received thimerosal-containing flu shots -- which are still being given to children despite the phase-out of thimerosal-containing childhood vaccines that began in 1999 -- and may have received other exposures because such vaccines were not immediately pulled from the market.

Handley said his son's improvement in the eight months since they began chelation -- with another 10 months planned -- is "two different worlds. He's gone from being on Pluto, meaning no recognition of his parents' arrival, departure or presence, to being extraordinarily aware of our comings and goings. His eye contact has gone up 1000-fold."

Hundreds of parents are volunteering to serve as "rescue angels" to help families learn about chelation therapy, Handley said; their contacts are listed on the Web site. "They all feel as passionately as my wife and I that parents need to know their kids can get better," Handley said. "We're tired of reading that this is a no-known-cause, no-cure disorder. That's simply an untrue statement."

In probable order of impact, the group asserts, the autism epidemic has been caused by:

--Thimerosal from vaccines;

--"synergistic toxins" that aggravate mercury's effects including antibiotics, aluminum from vaccines, and the body's own testosterone, which the group says explains why 80 to 90 percent of children with autism are boys;

--the mother's mercury load while pregnant, including mercury-containing vaccines such as the flu shot and RHO-gam given to RH-negative women; dental mercury amalgams; thimerosal-containing vaccines received prior to pregnancy; and fish consumption before, during and after pregnancy;

--the child's own dental mercury amalgams;

--the child's high seafood consumption;

--environmental mercury that is a byproduct of coal-fired industrial plants, and

--other sources including consumer products that contain mercury.

Some of the parents charge that the federal government and mainstream medicine, while skeptical of chelation and scornful of the theory behind it, have been strikingly uninterested in studying its effectiveness. That will be the subject of a future column.

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This ongoing series on the roots and rise of autism aims to be interactive with readers and welcomes comment, criticism and suggestions. E-mail: dolmsted@upi.com