

Los Angeles Times

U.S. Decision to Allow Mercury in KidsFlu Shots Raises Alarm

The CDC says it sees no harm in the preservative thimerosal. Parent groups attack its stance.

By Myron Levin
Times Staff Writer

7:22 PM PST, April 1, 2004

Hundreds of thousands of infants and toddlers who get flu shots starting this fall could be exposed to a mercury-laced preservative that has been all but eliminated from other pediatric vaccines due to health concerns.

Saying there is no proof of harm from exposure to the preservative thimerosal, officials with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have confirmed that they won't advise parents and doctors to choose a mercury-free version of the flu vaccine.

This year, flu shots are being added to the government's "recommend" list of vaccines that should be given to all young children. The CDC's decision, made despite pleas from parent activist groups and some experts, appears to be at odds with recent federal warnings about exposure to mercury, a potent neurotoxin, and with the government's successful effort to see mercury removed from other childhood vaccines. The mercury-free flu vaccine will be more expensive -- by roughly \$4 per shot -- because it is somewhat harder to make in large quantities than the alternative. If the CDC were to warn parents, demand for thimerosal-free shots would rise, possibly squeezing supplies. Some experts said there was a greater risk in infants and toddlers failing to be vaccinated against the flu because of a shortage than in their being vaccinated with shots containing mercury.

CDC executives wouldn't discuss their decision, but said in a statement that "the available scientific evidence has not shown thimerosal-containing vaccines to be harmful."

The American Academy of Pediatrics, which has a membership of 57,000 physicians, is backing the CDC.

But the agency has come under blistering attack from some parent groups. By not advising

parents and physicians, the government is "violating the precautionary principle which reminds doctors that, when in doubt, take an action which minimizes the risk of harm," said Barbara Loe Fisher, co-founder of the National Vaccine Information Center, a parent-led group that promotes safer vaccines.

Rep. David Weldon, R-Fla., said he planned to introduce a bill to ban thimerosal in childhood vaccines. The CDC's refusal to recommend mercury-free shots "is medical malpractice," Weldon said. A physician who has a young son, he said he wouldn't let the child have a mercury-containing shot.

Preservatives are used by drug companies to prevent the growth of bacteria and fungi in their vaccines. Thimerosal, which is nearly 50 percent ethyl mercury, had long been the preservative of choice.

That changed in 1999, when the U.S. Public Health Service and the pediatrics group called on manufacturers to voluntarily remove thimerosal from pediatric vaccines as a precaution.

In doing so, they acknowledged a major oversight: Under the country's increasingly aggressive policy of childhood immunizations, infants were being repeatedly exposed to mercury in cumulative doses far above Environmental Protection Agency guidelines.

Since then, vaccine producers have virtually eliminated thimerosal from regularly scheduled childhood vaccines.

Some parent groups and researchers believe that thimerosal has contributed to a sharp increase in reported rates of autism and other developmental disorders in children. Nearly 4,000 compensation claims have been filed in a special vaccine injury branch of the U.S. Court of Claims on behalf of children with autism-related disorders.

Vaccine makers and many scientists dispute the connection, arguing, among other things, that the exposures are too low and that ethyl mercury is more easily eliminated from the body than methyl mercury -- the type produced by industrial emissions that ends up in fish.

The CDC's neutrality on thimerosal in flu vaccines comes amid a spate of blunt warnings from other federal agencies about reducing methyl mercury levels in infants and toddlers, whose brains and nervous systems are rapidly developing.

Last month, for example, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration cautioned young children and women who are nursing or pregnant to avoid eating fish high in mercury content, such as shark and swordfish.

Boyd E. Haley, who is chairman of the department of chemistry at the University of Kentucky and has done research on both ethyl and methyl mercury, said it was "preposterous and ridiculous" for the government to warn about methyl mercury in fish but sanction ethyl mercury being injected into kids.

The CDC decision is "unconscionable," he said. "If it were my grandson or my granddaughter, there's no way in hell you'd give them a vaccine containing thimerosal."

The decision endorses the stance of a panel of experts that advises the CDC on vaccination policies. Citing estimates of 36,000 deaths a year from influenza, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Policy recommended that all children 6 to 24 months old be considered at-risk and receive two flu shots next fall. Rejecting pleas from parent activists, the committee refused to state a preference for giving thimerosal-free vaccines to toddlers and pregnant women.

The CDC will publish its decision later this month in an official agency bulletin.

The CDC orders mass quantities of vaccine for state and local health departments that immunize low-income children. Paradoxically, the agency has ordered up to 2 million doses of thimerosal-free vaccine for the coming fall to be sure there is enough for health departments that request it, said Roger Bernier, senior scientist with the CDC's immunization program.

However, the CDC's stating a thimerosal-free preference "would drive the demand even more aggressively," Bernier said. There is no need to do so, he said, given the lack of proof of harm.

Dr. Margaret Rennels, who chairs the pediatric group's committee on infectious diseases, cited manufacturers' estimates that nearly one-third of a vaccine is lost in the process of removing thimerosal and in packaging the preservative-free version. "It is the judgment of pediatric disease specialists that it would be better to have a third bigger supply given the lack of evidence of harm from thimerosal," she said.

It's unclear, however, if high demand for preservative-free vaccine would in fact disrupt supplies.

Three companies produce flu vaccines for the U.S. market. Only one, Aventis Pasteur Inc., a subsidiary of French pharmaceutical giant Aventis SA, is licensed to make the medicine for children as young as 6 to 24 months.

Aventis makes both thimerosal and thimerosal-free vaccine at its Swiftwater, Pa., plant. Len Lavenda, director of public affairs, said Aventis encourages parents who are concerned to ask their doctors to order thimerosal-free vaccines. The company believes "we will be able to produce a sufficient amount" of mercury-free vaccines, Lavenda said, "providing we're notified early enough."

Web Note: This article may be viewed directly at <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-vaccine2apr02,1,1037077.story?coll=la-home-headlines>