

Research, not arguments, is the answer

*By Nancy Blackmon*

The phone rang as the news report started. I raced to pick up the receiver, trying to hear the reporter as I answered the phone.

"Hey," said Tim, my youngest son.

"Hi," I answered, straining to hear the television.

"There is a report on the news about autism," my son said. "It's on right now."

"Yeah, I'm watching it," I said. "Thanks for calling."

The face of an autistic girl filled the screen as a voice talked about a newly released report on the possible link between childhood vaccines and autism.

As the child played, her mother said she thought vaccines may have had something to do with her daughter's autism.

However, that is not what the report released by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded. According to a panel of experts they could find no link between autism and vaccines.

Does this mean one doesn't exist? Well best I can tell, despite this report, the jury is still out on that question.

The release of the report and the subsequent media attention started a flurry of press releases from groups and individuals such as the National Vaccine Information Center, Unlocking Autism, SafeMinds, America's leading scientific

organization investigating the risks mercury-containing medical products pose to children, and Rep. Dave Weldon, M.D. (Fla.). Congressman Weldon's bill, HR 4169, was introduced to Congress in April of this year and calls for a ban on the use of mercury in vaccines in all states.

In his press release responding to the IOM report Weldon said, "Today's report is premature, perhaps perilously reliant on epidemiology, based on preliminary incomplete information, and may ultimately be repudiated.

"This report will not deter me from my commitment to seeing that this is fully investigated, nor will it put to rest the concerns of parents who believe their children were harmed by mercury-containing vaccines or the MMR vaccine."

In its press release, the National Vaccine Information Center said:

"NVIC has been calling for independent, non-governmental, non-industry research into the genetic and other biological high risk factors of vaccine associated brain and immune system dysfunction, including autism, for the past two decades.

"Today's IOM report discouraged further research into vaccine-associated autism. NVIC also supports removing vaccine risk research and monitoring from the CDC and NIH because of conflicts of interest."

And SafeMinds weighed in with this statement.

"The IOM has not only compromised their integrity and independence, but also failed the American public, especially mercury-injured children with autism, by towing the CDC, FDA, vaccine industry line. This committee and its report clearly chose to ignore groundbreaking scientific research on the mercury-autism link, and instead the IOM has issued a flawed, incomplete report that continues to put America's children at risk."

Unfortunately the NBC Nightly News report presented only one side of the argument so viewers didn't hear these comments. The CBS Evening News did

a better job by giving voice to those who didn't agree with the report.

What does this mean to parents of autistic children and to parents facing decisions about vaccines?

For me it says, there is a lot we still don't know about a possible link between vaccines and autism in genetically susceptible children. We need more research, research free of any conflicts of interest.

What I think it says to parents is "ask questions." Find out if the vaccine your child is getting contains thimerosal, a form of mercury. Question the wisdom of giving vaccines to a sick child. Consider whether you want to limit the number of vaccines your child receives at one time.

I like the way Mark Blaxill, MBA, director of SafeMinds, put it.

"SafeMinds is pro-vaccine, as long as every available scientific resource has been used to reasonably guarantee its safety. Saying more clinical evidence is needed, then not supporting the funding of such research is nothing more than Washington double-speak shrouded under the guise of science. The IOM has served neither science nor the American public well here today."

I also like the way the CBS report ended. It said as long as any question remains about a possible link between certain vaccines and childhood developmental disorders, such as autism, why not err on the side of caution.

Because I remember reports that changed with the years, being safe rather than sorry is wise. For example, reports assured women that hormone replacement therapy was not a problem. After millions of women trusted those reports, the story changed.

Or consider the example given by Rep. Weldon.

"The IOM is not immune to error and has been forced to reverse itself before, most recently reversing a long-standing finding that chronic lymphocytic

leukemia (CLL) was not due to Agent Orange exposures. A similar reversal is a very real possibility here."

As a parent, I think our children are too precious a resource to risk while experts argue about reports. We need answers about the cause of autism and other childhood disorders. Until we have them, hearing both sides of the argument over the safety of vaccines is important. Too many lives are at risk for parents not to have all the information.