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AUTISM COMMUNITY CALLS NEW STUDY IN JOURNAL PEDIATRICS MISLEADING, DECLARES AUTISM EPIDEMIC REAL

Department of Education Data Inadequate to Determine Prevalence Over Time

A study appearing in next week's edition of Pediatrics titled "Diagnostic Substitution and Changing Autism Prevalence" is being questioned by the autism community. The report, authored by Dr. Paul Shattuck, uses US Department of Education data to support the hypothesis that real autism rates have not increased over the last two decades, and that reported increases are a function of reclassification of students from learning disabilities and mental retardation categories. This theory has been rejected in a number of scientific studies. The autism community would like to see scientific studies based on more valid databases in order to determine accurate prevalence trends.

The autism parent organizations including SafeMinds (www.safeminds.org), the National Autism Association (www.nationalautismassociation.org), A-CHAMP (www.a-champ.org), and Generation Rescue (www.generationrescue.org) see this latest article as part of a phenomenon of epidemic denial that inhibits open scientific investigation of autism's causes and blocks allocation of needed resources into autism. The groups note that the prevalence of autism now far exceeds other high profile disorders such as cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, and juvenile diabetes. They request that autism be recognized as a national emergency and that unbiased epidemiological studies be conducted that count both older and younger people with autism to see if the increases are real.

The paper's use of Department of Education data to conclude no epidemic exists is troubling. The study author himself said that the data set is inconsistent and is subject to administrative and policy changes by the states. He notes that 28 of the 48 states included in the analysis do not support his theory of reclassification as a reason for autism increases. "Each state has its own rules and the autism rates by state vary greatly, so aggregating the state-level data to a US average is not good statistical practice," explained Mark Blaxill of SafeMinds. "Other, more reliable data sets, like the California Department of Developmental Disabilities, do show a real increase in autism."

Autism Groups voiced support for the commentary by Dr. Craig Newschaffer that accompanies the Shattuck article in Pediatrics. This commentary makes a number of valid points regarding Dr. Shattuck's approach and conclusions. The autism groups note that the hypothesis of reclassification, or "diagnostic substitution", has been examined and rejected in several scientific papers as a likely major factor in reported autism increases. One study was authored by Dr. Newschaffer. A study by Robert Byrd and a study by Blaxill, Baskin and Spitzer have also ruled out diagnostic substitution.

More information about the Shattuck study and autism prevalence may be found at www.safeminds.org or by calling Jamie Shor at 202-628-7772.