

Time for CDC to Come Clean

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. *Wed Mar 1, 12:10 AM ET*

Correspondence newly obtained under the Freedom of Information Act raises troubling new questions about CDC's role in the Thimerosal scandal. Thimerosal is the mercury-based vaccine preservative that has been linked to epidemics of neurological disorders, including autism, in American children born after 1989.

Responding to scientific studies linking dangerous levels of mercury to a range of health disorders, the CDC in July 1999 recommended that the nation's vaccine makers eliminate Thimerosal as a preservative, "as soon as possible."

But the newly released documents show that behind the scenes CDC was quietly discouraging Thimerosal's removal. In a July 1999 letter, vaccine producer SmithKline Beecham tells CDC that it is ready to produce non-Thimerosal DTP (Diphtheria/Tetanus/Pertussis) vaccines immediately and has sufficient inventories to supply the entire U.S. market during the remainder of 1999 and the first half of 2000, by which time other vaccine manufacturers would have their Thimerosal-free DTP vaccines on line.

Thimerosal-laden DTP vaccines containing 25 micrograms of mercury apiece were then being administered to American infants at two months, four months and six months -- far exceeding EPA's recommended safe level for mercury. Had CDC accepted SmithKline's offer, it could have immediately reduced the mercury exposures to vaccinated six-month-old children by 40%.

However, in November, CDC mysteriously sent a letter back rejecting SmithKline's offer. Then, on July 14, 2000 CDC published a deceptive press release promising to require that all vaccines be Thimerosal-free as soon as "adequate supplies are available." This was a full 12 months after the agency had denied SmithKline's proposal.

"If CDC were basing its decision on safety alone, it would have taken SmithKline up on its offer. That's a no-brainer," said a federal health official who requested anonymity. "So there were other considerations beside safety that were guiding their decision making."

Among these "other considerations" were CDC's important concerns for the preservation of the vaccine program, a bureaucratic impulse for self-preservation, and protecting the economic interests of its vaccine industry friends.

"Immediate withdrawal would send a strong message; 'We messed up!'" the health official told me. "And I don't think they wanted to send that message to parents, the public or those considering legal action."

"There was also concern," says the federal official, "that an immediate withdrawal might discredit the international vaccine programs for which CDC is an important partner." The World Health Organization has urged CDC against the banning of Thimerosal in U.S. vaccines since that prohibition might discredit WHO's third world inoculation programs. WHO, with U.S. funding, is now injecting children in developing countries with the same amounts of Thimerosal we were giving American kids at their highest exposures, but in a shorter time period. In May 2001, WHO committed to "develop a strong advocacy campaign to support the ongoing use of Thimerosal."

But CDC insiders argue that CDC's primary concern was the economic impacts on its pharmaceutical industry partners. "The big consideration was cost," says the federal health official. "A lot of CDC's friends in the vaccine industry had stockpiled Thimerosal-based vaccines. If they couldn't sell them the costs would total in the tens of millions of dollars."

On July 14, 2000 CDC promised to complete the transition to Thimerosal-free vaccines for children by first quarter 2001. But, probably for the reasons stated above, its commitment sometimes seems half-hearted. CDC continues to promote the use of Thimerosal in vaccines. The agency continues to send its top spokesman Roger Bernier around the country to testify before state legislatures to derail state efforts to ban Thimerosal in vaccines. Last week Bernier was testifying against a proposed Thimerosal ban in Maryland.

CDC continues to exert muscular efforts to derail studies of American cohorts -- the Amish, Christian Scientists, and home-schooled children -- who were not exposed to Thimerosal vaccines. Preliminary studies of these groups indicate very low levels of the neurological disorders, including autism, that have been associated with Thimerosal in vaccinated populations.

It's time for the CDC to come clean with the American public. Its tactics of deception and obfuscation are jeopardizing the credibility of the entire vaccine program, and therefore posing an enormous danger to public health.