Autism and Vaccines

Everyone in our business learns to take a punch, but even we've been surprised by the furor response to an editorial we ran a few weeks ago about vaccines. The subject deserves further attention, not least because the goal of our antagonists appears to be to shut down public debate on the matter.

For the past few years, a small cohort of parents has taken to loudly claiming that thimerosal, a preservative used in vaccines for 60 years, is the cause of autism in children. Their allegations have scared many parents about immunizations, sent trial lawyers scurrying to sue the few remaining vaccine makers, and inspired an ugly political dispute. Lost in the controversy has been a little thing called science.

We felt someone ought to point out that nothing currently exists in the medical world to justify this furor—that thimerosal has never been credibly linked to autism, and that recent studies in leading medical journals have also failed to find a link. That research is one of many reasons the medical community remains solid in its belief that vaccines are safe.

To our surprise, we had wandered into a hornet's nest of moral intimidation. In letters and e-mails we've since been accused of "fear," a "terrorist act," and of having an "industry profit-promoting agenda." We've been told we belong to a vast conspiracy—including researchers, pediatricians, corporations, health officials and politicians—devoted to poisoning their children. A few have harassed our secretaries and threatened an editorial writer.

As writers for an independent newspaper, we aren't about to shut up. But what worries us is that these activists are using the same tactics in an attempt to silence others with crucial roles in public health and scientific research. The campaign to silence or discredit them has already had damaging consequences.

A case in point is the National Alliance for Autism Research. This widely respected outfit was founded by parents of autistic children and its staff and volunteers have raised millions for research. When the autism claims first surfaced, NAAR dutifully funded a Danish study, which found no connection between the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine and autism. Within days, the critics were trash talking NAAR, claiming it was under the influence of drug companies (untrue) and suggesting its researchers couldn't be trusted. NAAR had to spend valuable time and resources rebutting those claims so it can remain a source of honest information for worried parents.

Meanwhile, doctors who have spoken about the benefits of vaccination—Paul Offit (who writes nearby) and Samuel Katz (the co-creator of the measles vaccine)—have been targeted as baby killers and compared to Hitler. The goal appears to be to silence doctors who encourage immunizations.

That would be a disaster. While we don't know what causes autism, we do know that diseases like measles cause blindness and brain damage. Doctors are already struggling to be heard over Internet rumors, and they report that parents are increasingly nervous about vaccines. That's how paranoia started in England and Ireland, where parents were swept up in autism claims and refused to immunize. Ireland, a country with a population 77 times smaller than that of the U.S., reported 2,800 measles cases in 2002. The U.S. had 0.

As it happens, the thimerosal flap has already taken a human toll. Health officials recommended taking thimerosal out of vaccines in 1999 to help calm fears—but this only fueled claims of a government cover-up. Worse, as Dr. Offit reported in a recent issue of Pediatrics, some hospitals misinterpreted thimerosal-related recommendations and suspended some vaccinations for newborns. One institution later reported the death, from acute hepatitis B-induced liver failure, of a three-month-old infant who wasn't immunized.

Aided by trial lawyers, the intimidation has spread to Congress. Vaccine makers receive some liability protection from the federal Vaccine Injury Compensation Program—which pays out to the rare family whose child is injured by vaccines. But tort lawyers have exploited loopholes to file billion-dollar thimerosal suits that could bankrupt the few remaining vaccine makers.

When Republican Majority Leader Bill Frist tried to modernize VICP—and require autism claims to go through the program like everyone else—the autism community went to work. They camped out in Washington and convinced three Republican senators to kill any liability protection. The Senators claimed in a recent letter to us that they hope the bill will be reconsidered, but it seems to have disappeared. The lawsuits go on.

None of this, we should stress, is in the interest of families struck with autism. Researchers have spent years studying the vaccine-autism link, and we hope they continue. But if the research disproves a connection—as it has so far—the autism community needs to listen and move on. Research dollars are limited, and parents of autistic children deserve to see the money spent where it will do the most good.

Autism is a terrible diagnosis, and we hope science soon gives parents the chance at a cure. But the best way to achieve that goal is through open and honest inquiry that shouldn't be stopped because of the clamoring of an intolerant few.