



EDITORIAL

The Autism Epidemic, Vaccinations, and Mercury

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While there are a few Flat-Earthers who insist that there is no real epidemic of autism, only an increased awareness, it is obvious to everyone else that the number of young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has risen, and continues to rise, dramatically.

I first called attention to the increase in an editorial in the September 1995 issue of *Autism Research Review International*, which I edit, titled "Is there an autism epidemic?" [1]. My answer was "Yes! There clearly has been a sharp increase in the number of autistic children." Some readers agreed, others did not.

Five years later, the number of autistic children, as well as the amount of evidence documenting the increase, has continued to escalate. My most recent editorial on the subject (June 1999) was accordingly titled "The Autism Explosion" [2].

The evidence was compelling in 1995, and is overwhelming in 2000. Nevertheless, I read and hear daily about professionals, including many regarded as authorities on autism, who assert that there is no real increase in the autism population. They insist that the increase is illusory, and merely the result of greater awareness and improved diagnosis.

Bennett Leventhal, Professor of Child Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the University of Chicago, has been quoted by a newspaper reporter as replying "Rubbish!" when asked about my position on the increase. "There is increasingly powerful evidence that this is a genetic disorder," he stated. Since, of course, there is no such thing as an epidemic of a genetic disorder, there can be no increase of autism, he assumes.

Eric Fombonne, of the Institute of Psychiatry in London, says that the perceived increase reflects only "improved recognition" and "a broadening of the concept."

I don't think so.

I saw the word autism for the first time in the spring of 1958, five years after I had earned my PhD in psychology. My wife and I had taken our implacable, screaming newborn son to our pediatrician two years earlier. Dr Black had been in practice for 35 years and had never seen a child like Mark. Nor had any other physician we consulted. When Mark was two years old his strange, aloof, ritualistic behavior reminded my wife of a child she had read about in an old college textbook. There, in that textbook, I first saw the word "autism."

William Crook of Tennessee, a pediatrician who had received his medical training in the 1940s at Johns Hopkins, where Leo Kanner taught, became intrigued by autism and actively sought such cases by letting his pediatric colleagues throughout the South know of his special interest. It was not until 1973, 24 years after starting his practice, that he had his first autistic patient. Then came more. "I am absolutely certain that there is a huge increase in autism," Dr Crook told me. I have heard similar tales from many physicians as well as special education teachers and school administrators whose experience dates back to the early 1970s and before. Autism was truly rare in those days.

The argument that there is simply greater awareness and better recognition of autism nowadays makes no sense. Shelly Reynolds, a mother, states her position very clearly: "Imagine our family at the dinner table some evening, and me remarking to my husband 'By the way, Aiden, have you noticed that our three-year-old son is not talking yet and doesn't do anything except sit there flapping his hands?' Those doctors who say there is no