

# Newsday

## Government weighs chelation study in autistic children

BY DELTHIA RICKS

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For two years Christine Heeren has diligently taken her son to a Long Island physician for intravenous infusions of a compound she says not only "detoxifies" the boy, but erases many obvious signs of autism.

The treatment is called chelation therapy, infusions developed more than 70 years ago and used since to purge lead from the blood. Parents who blame their children's autism on mercury from vaccines call the unapproved treatment a godsend.

Medical experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics, say there is no scientific basis for a vaccine/autism link. Thimerosal, a mercury-based compound, once used as a preservative in childhood vaccines, was removed in 2001.

This week the head of the National Institute of Mental Health, said he's considering a clinical study to determine whether the treatment has merit. Government researchers are under pressure to formally study chelation therapy because of anecdotal reports from parents like Heeren. For now, the analysis is on hold because of safety concerns.

In 2005, an autistic boy, 5, whose parents traveled from Britain to Pennsylvania for the therapy, died as a result of the procedure. A 2-year-old Texas girl died also in 2005 after being chelated for lead poisoning. In both cases, a CDC report revealed vital electrolytes - especially calcium - were leached from their tissues.

Chelation therapy involves introducing into the bloodstream a synthetic amino acid - ethylene diamine tetra acetic acid (EDTA) - into the bloodstream. The compound acts like a chemical magnet, attracting minerals and lead from tissues, which are ferried from the body in urine. There are two forms of the compound, sodium-EDTA and calcium-EDTA.

CDC scientists say only calcium-EDTA should be used in children with lead poisoning. In the deaths, both youngsters had been given sodium-EDTA. No studies have cleared a chelating drug for autism.

"My son will be 9 in August and we started IV chelation with him the month of his 7th birthday," said Heeren, a Middle Island photographer and blogger.

The treatments cost between \$200 and \$500 a week. Heeren said her health insurance plan covers them.

Dr. Marvin Boris, a Woodbury physician who prescribes a range of alternative treatments to children with autism, said he has performed intravenous chelation therapy on at least 3,000 Long Island children. He complained many patients' insurers won't pay for it.

"We see that when children have the therapy they markedly improve," he said.

**North Carolina physician Rashid Buttar, who says children from throughout the country are brought to his Charlotte-area practice for the treatment, performed the treatment on his son. Although the boy did not have autism, he was "developmentally delayed," which Buttar attributed to "heavy metal toxins."**

Geri Dawson, chief science officer for Autism Speaks, a major advocacy organization, said her group welcomes a large-scale federal clinical trial. "We have a strong belief that when many parents are using a treatment that there should be a controlled clinical study."

Dr. Andrew Adesman, chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park, said he would like to see the research done. "I do not accept and I do not buy mercury poisoning as a cause of autism," Adesman said. "I am not recommending that parents pursue [chelation]."

"The [government] should be commended for considering the research. From a sociopolitical standpoint, I think it's critical," he said.

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