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Some Illinois Vaccines Still Legally Laced With Mercury

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Despite the new Illinois law that limits mercury levels in vaccines, the Illinois Department of Public Health has declared 4 vaccines with high levels of mercury exempt from the law.

Before you roll up your child's sleeve—and yours—for a flu vaccine this year, you'd be wise to check the package insert to see if it contains what many say are toxic levels of mercury. Although Illinois passed landmark legislation that limits mercury levels in vaccines to 1.25 micrograms per dose by the first of this year and eliminates mercury all together by January 1st 2008, the Illinois Department of Public Health has issued a declaration of exemption which allows four vaccines to exceed the limit. In addition to the flu vaccine, the diphtheria-tetanus, Japanese encephalitis and meningitis vaccines are also exempted from the law. The Illinois Department of Public Health claims the mercury-free versions of these vaccines are either too expensive, in short supply or non-existent, hence they have allowed thimerosal, the mercury-laden preservative in these vaccines to persist. In the case of the flu vaccine — that means a whopping 25 micrograms of mercury per dose.

Dr. David Ayoub, Assistant Prof. of Southern Illinois University School of Medicine and Medical Director of Prairie Collaborative, an immunization watchdog organization in Springfield says the mercury contained in one dose of the flu vaccine exceeds both the EPA's and CDC's adult toxicity limits for organic mercury exposure and could be considered a toxic waste. "For mercury level to be defined as toxic waste level is 200 parts per billion. What is contained in a mercury vaccine vial is 50,000 parts per billion, so if you were to drop a vaccine vial, you would have to call hazmat. I mean that's a toxic hazard and we are injecting toxic waste levels of mercury into people and that's unimaginable."

David Carvalho, Deputy Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health says IDPH is committed to moving in the direction of preservative-free vaccines because there is the perception on the part of the public that mercury in vaccines is



LETHAL DOSE: Although Illinois passed landmark legislation that limits mercury levels in vaccines to 1.25 micrograms per dose by the first of this year and eliminates mercury all together by January 1st 2008, the Illinois Department of Public Health has issued a declaration of exemption which allows four vaccines to exceed the limit. (Photos.com)

unsafe, however, he says "there is no scientific basis to be concerned about thimerosal in vaccines."

Laura Cellini, the mother of a recovering autistic child disagrees. "He should probably go do his homework because there's a lot of scientific evidence and we discussed this when we did the bill." Cellini's son, Jonathan was diagnosed with autism at the age of two after he suddenly regressed when he was about a year and a half old. Her experience and research convinced Cellini that her son's symptoms that included an impaired immune system and temper tantrums were signs of mercury poisoning. "If we find it coming out of coal burning power plants it's a neurotoxin. If we find it in our fish or drinking water, it's a neurotoxin. If we find it in a thermometer it's a neurotoxin. Just because you now take it and put it in a vaccine does not mean that it is no longer a neurotoxic substance."

IDPH's Cavalho is quick to point out that the mercury found in the environment and ingested is methylmercury, a different form of the liquid metal than ethylmercury found in thimerosal. He says it is not fair to use EPA's limit (.1 microgram of methylmercury per kilogram of body weight per day) as the toxicity measure for both kinds of mercury. "When you do that calculation and compare it to EPA standards and indicated that EPA standards would be violated then EPA would have banned the vaccine and they haven't."

Yet the EPA standards are indeed cited by other government agencies for measuring safe doses of the ethylmercury. According to the May 2003 report by the House Subcommittee on Government Reform chaired by Congressman Dan Burton, Republican from Indiana, the Institute of Medicine and the FDA have stated that "in the absence of a specific standard for ethylmercury, the limits for ingested methylmercury should be used for injected ethylmercury." By these measures, Dr. David Ayoub says that an adult who weighs about 150 pounds would receive about 3 and a half times the EPA's daily limit organic mercury in one dose of the flu shot. He says a child will receive 11 to 16 times what the EPA considers safe and a fetus will exceed the EPA limit by several hundred times. " Our biggest concern is giving mercury to pregnant women. The fetus is going to get the largest dose of mercury in Illinois. That's clearly the most vulnerable citizen."

A recent study suggests that ethylmercury may be even more harmful than methylmercury. Professor Tom Burbacher of the University of Washington's Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences compared the two kinds of mercury by injecting macaque monkeys with thimerosal at the rate experienced by young children while feeding methylmercury to another group of monkeys at the same rate through their food. He found that although the blood levels of injected ethylmercury dropped faster than the blood levels of ingested methylmercury, ethylmercury had the potential to stay in the brain and cause damage. "Once the mercury gets in your brain it actually could be transferred into another

chemical form, into inorganic mercury and inorganic mercury actually stays in the brain for a lot longer than organic mercury does. And there have been studies that show inorganic mercury in primates show that inorganic mercury can also cause a neuroinflammatory response in the brain." In fact, Burbacher says, the inorganic mercury level in the brain was probably twice as high in the monkeys who received thimerosal than the monkeys who ingested methylmercury. "It wasn't peculiar to one animal or two it was a group response."

Illinois' attempt to phase out mercury preservatives in vaccines has caught the eye of many advocates across the country. Laura Cellini says she has received calls from New Jersey to Hawaii from those seeking similar legislation in their state. Although the new law doesn't help autistic children like her son, Jonathan, Cellini, had hoped it would save future children from slipping into autism and she says hearing about the exemption made her frustrated.

"I found it very disrespectful of the process. We have a democratic legislative process in place in this country and that's what we went through to get this law, and the fact that the department of public health stated that they don't agree with it and therefore they're going to exempt it, I find to be very disrespectful of the process and the players.

Senator Don Harmon of Oak Park, a key sponsor of the law, admits that it allows the IDPH to declare exemptions but said he was disappointed to see the department had granted an exemption so quickly. "We put the provision in there purposefully to avoid a situation where there was a risk of an epidemic or a shortage of available vaccines but it's not clear to me that there was a shortage of thimerosal-free vaccine this year."

David Cavalho of the Illinois Department of Public Health agrees that there were enough infant doses of thimerosal-free flu vaccine but says that children three years and older receive the adult vaccine which would have been too expensive for the state to buy. "The difference for us is the difference between the 60,000 doses that we were allocated by the government at zero cost and 60,000 doses at full cost. I believe the full cost for preservative-free vaccine is between twelve and fourteen dollars. So if we were to purchase 60,000 doses at full cost to replace the vaccines that we are getting for free it would cost between \$740,000 and \$840,000 dollars."

Barbara Mullarkey, president of the Illinois Vaccine Awareness Coalition, believes the Illinois Department of Public Health has the responsibility to inform citizens that the vaccines they are about to receive exceed the state's mercury limit. "I think they have a responsibility even though it was not in the law. What is the mission of the IDPH? I thought it was to protect the public." Mullarkey hopes every physician, nurse or pharmacist will allow patients to read the package inserts of any vaccine before they are administered so that they can "decide if they in fact do want to put this into their body or into their child's

body."

Senator Don Harmon says he may consider more restrictive legislation if the exemptions continue. "I hope not, but I'm certainly willing to consider that if we don't get the sort of cooperation from the department that I hope we will get."

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