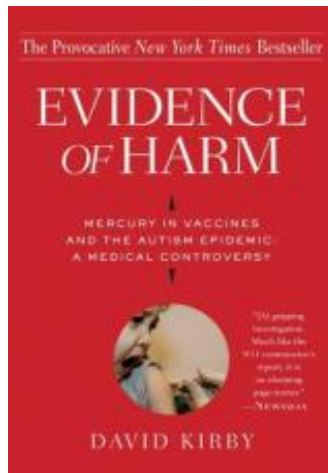


Evidence of Harm: Mercury in Vaccines and the Autism Epidemic: A Medical Controversy

by David Kirby



About the Book

In the 1990s reported autism cases among American children began spiking, from about 1 in 10,000 in 1987 to a shocking 1 in 166 today. This trend coincided with the addition of several new shots to the nation's already crowded vaccination schedule, grouped together and given soon after birth or in the early months of infancy. Most of these shots contained a little-known preservative called thimerosal, which includes a quantity of the toxin mercury.

Evidence of Harm explores the heated controversy over what many parents, physicians, public officials, and educators have called an "epidemic" of afflicted children. Following several families, David Kirby traces their struggle to understand how and why their once-healthy kids rapidly descended into silence or disturbed behavior, often accompanied by severe physical illness. Alarmed by the levels of mercury in the vaccine schedule, these families sought answers from their doctors, from science, from pharmaceutical companies that manufacture vaccines, and finally from the Center for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration—to no avail. But as they dug deeper, the families also found powerful allies in Congress and in the small community of physicians and researchers who believe that the rise of autism and other disorders is linked to toxic levels of mercury that accumulate in the systems of some children.

An important and troubling book, **Evidence of Harm** reveals both the public and unsung obstacles faced by desperate families who have been opposed by the combined power of the federal government, health agencies, and pharmaceutical giants. From closed meetings of the FDA, CDC, and drug companies, to the mysterious rider inserted into the 2002 Homeland Security Bill that would bar thimerosal litigation, to open hearings held by Congress, this book shows a medical establishment determined to deny "evidence of harm" that might be connected with thimerosal and mercury in vaccines. In the end, as research is beginning to demonstrate, the questions raised by these families have significant implications for all children, and for those entrusted to oversee our national health.

Discussion Guide

1. First and foremost: do *you* believe there is a link between mercury in vaccines and autism? If you don't believe that mercury is a cause of autism, what other environmental factors might have triggered an increase of cases in the 1990s?
2. As best you can, place yourself in the position of the various mothers and fathers who are profiled in this book. How do you think you would have reacted to finding out your child had autism? Which parents' situation did you most identify with, and why?
3. What do you think of the Safe Minds parents? Could you see yourself ever becoming an activist, like they did? Or would you deal with the issues more privately? Do you believe one or the other of these is the "right" way to handle the situation?
4. Several issues are clouded by the fact that significant information in this debate is not made public (e.g., the internal IOM transcripts; research done by Eli Lilly). Should this information be made public? Where do you suggest the balance between full disclosure and the right to privacy be weighted?
5. Do you believe privately funded studies are useful? If so, what do you say to charges of "bad science" and the suggestion that these studies just seek to support their theory? If not, how and where do you see studies finding funding?
6. Are concerns over patient confidentiality a legitimate reason for denying access to the raw Vaccine Safety Datalink (VSD) data? Why or why not?
7. What do you think the government's role and responsibility should be in addressing the issue? Are they doing a good job, a bad job, or somewhere in between? What do you think are the major positives and negatives of government involvement?
8. Related to the question above, should states and/or the federal government pass bans on thimerosal in vaccines? Why or why not?
9. It has been argued that some experts who sit on vaccine advisory panels to the FDA and the CDC have a conflict of interest since they have financial relationships with pharmaceutical companies. How should this be handled?
10. What are your opinions about the highly controversial chelation therapy (the two-step process that "scrapes" metals from cells)? If a member of your family was thinking about having this treatment for autism, would you be encouraging or discouraging? Why?
11. Has this book caused you to think twice about the thimerosal content of the vaccines you and your family have received? Has it caused you to rethink any other part of your life, like lowering the levels of mercury to which you and your family are exposed?
12. What would you like to see pursued at this point --- in terms of the relation between autism and thimerosal and the way federal officials have handled the controversy?

Author Bio

David Kirby has been a contributor to *The New York Times* for eight years, where he writes articles about science and health, among other subjects. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Critical Praise

"Well-researched...This is an issue that will not go away."

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