

AMA News  
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## Pediatric vaccination subject of controversy

A confrontation between syndicated columnist Robert Mendelsohn, MD, and the director of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) unexpectedly enflamed a report on pediatric immunization at the American Medical Association's Annual Meeting.

Dr. Mendelsohn made a surprise appearance before a reference committee to state his widely published views that vaccinations, particularly for pertussis, should be halted pending further research.

"Dr. Mendelsohn does not tell the scientific truth," said Harry Jenison, MD, AAP's executive director. "It is indeed regrettable what he has done to the very important efforts toward mass immunization in this country." He also charged Dr. Mendelsohn with giving "careless scientific testimony against our colleagues in court."

Saying many pediatricians have testified against the vaccine in the hundreds

of lawsuits filed, Dr. Mendelsohn suggested "changing this from a personal issue on Bob Mendelsohn's books and television appearances" to include the numerous medical authorities who sided with him.

Dr. Mendelsohn was the only dissenter at the reference committee and in the House of Delegates. Joe Skom, MD, of the Council on Scientific Affairs said that anti-vaccine articles had generated many of the lawsuits. He added that physicians must look at the risk-benefit ratio of vaccinations, and it will be obvious the benefits far outweigh any problems.

The council's report on pediatric immunization was even stronger. It said, "Some pediatricians agree, at least in part, with his (Dr. Mendelsohn's) assessment and do not administer the pertussis vaccine. These physicians are ignoring the lessons of the past." The report concluded that vaccination programs should continue.

## Pediatric immunization endorsed

**CHICAGO**—Responding to media criticism of widely used pediatric vaccines, particularly pertussis, the AMA House of Delegates endorsed current immunization practices and warned parents and physicians against neglecting recommended vaccinations.

Though every effort should be made to increase their safety, existing vaccines against childhood diseases have far fewer adverse consequences than the diseases they are designed to prevent, says an AMA Council on Scientific Affairs report adopted by the association.

"We took this position because of stories in the press [charging] immunization does more harm than good," says council chairman William D. Dolan of Arlington, Va. "We feel [physicians] advising against vaccinations are doing their patients a great disservice."

At issue were several lay media stories, including a network television show, charging pertussis vaccine produces serious neurologic sequelae. However, the AMA report concludes the risk of severe brain damage following pertussis vaccination is only one in 110,000, compared with one in 10,000 for people who get the disease.

The AMA report surveyed published studies of vaccine safety and efficacy for all childhood vaccines. It concludes widespread use has essentially eliminated many formerly common childhood diseases as major causes of morbidity and mor-

ality and has done so with few adverse consequences. However, a physician should take patient history and health status into account before administering a vaccine.

The AMA action endorses the American Academy of Pediatrics' position on immunization. "We've made unbelievable progress over the past decade or three," says Dr. M. Harry Jennison, executive director of the AAP. "Now we can say that pertussis is controlled, that measles is about to be completely controlled, polio is controlled—this is scientific progress."

One side effect of controlling childhood diseases is that few people today, including physicians, have experience with illnesses such as polio, tetanus, or diphtheria, the AMA report says.

Though the AAP and the AMA claim vaccines are safe and have controlled many diseases, critics say immunization has had little to do with the disappearance of diseases such as diphtheria and pertussis.

"These vaccines are like a voodoo curse: The doctor says 'if you don't do what I say, you'll die,'" says Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, self-described "medical heretic" and chief public critic of vaccines. "In fact, vaccines appear to do little good."

Dr. Mendelsohn claims common childhood diseases already were disappearing rapidly before vaccines were introduced, and widespread immunization didn't even

affect the rate of disappearance. He also claims many pediatricians have chosen not to give pertussis vaccine to their own children, despite AAP recommendations, and he says his grandchildren have received no immunizations.

"The whole theory and practice of vaccines is wrong," he said after testifying against the AMA report. Despite the report's conclusion, he is glad the AMA put the immunization question on its agenda and is confident future consideration will lead to adoption of his views.

However, the AMA and the AAP challenge Dr. Mendelsohn's allegations. "His opinion is not substantiated by data or accepted by responsible pediatricians," Dr. Dolan says, observing that immunization reductions in England and Japan have led to pertussis outbreaks.

Further, an outbreak in the Washington, D. C. area following a television show about alleged pertussis immunization hazards seems linked to reduced immunization there, says Dr. Raymond Scalettar, an AMA delegate from D. C.

"Any risk from pertussis vaccine is so remote and so many times avoidable that we strongly urge that pertussis immunization continue," says Dr. Jennison. "Many people today are not old enough to remember what whooping cough is like. Anyone who's ever seen a small infant gasping for breath for weeks on end, finally becoming brain damaged—we just never want it to come back." ■