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HEADLINE: Children denied immunity;
Thousand of families say mercury, used to preserve some
vaccines, has triggered autism in their children

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Lanier Weed is 6 years old and can't talk. At the slightest sound -
- the chirping of crickets, the click of a camera shutter -- she
covers her ears in fear. School, at least in the traditional sense,
is out of the question.

"Every Christmas, every birthday, is a marker to me of what she
can't do," said her mother, Leslie Weed of Ponte Vedra Beach,
who estimates her daughter has the cognitive skills of a 2-year-
old.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Weed and her husband,
Bobby, raised two perfectly healthy girls, and until Lanier was 18
months old, she was developing normally, too. Then her nervous
system stopped growing.

A psychiatrist diagnosed autism. Three specialists found
incredibly high mercury levels in her body.
The Weeds say she was poisoned by a mercury-filled
preservative in her childhood vaccines. "The fungicide," Leslie
Weed calls it.

They aren't alone. At least 40 other Jacksonville-area families
have reported similar symptoms in the past five years -- an
apparently normal child suddenly regressing by 30 months.
They are among more than 3,700 families nationwide with
identical claims pending before the Vaccine Court, a special

tribunal of the U.S. Court of Federal Claims in Bethesda, Md., where complaints about vaccinations must be aired before any legal action can take place. The number of claims continues to grow, according to the court.

Each alleges the 50 percent mercury content in thimerosal, used by drugmakers to sterilize and preserve the shelf life of vaccines, led to symptoms of autism. The court tentatively plans to rule on the claims' validity in July.

"All these children have been exposed to vast amounts of mercury, which exceed the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] guidelines by more than 100 percent," said attorney Alan Pickert, who represents the Jacksonville families. "These kids have basically had their lives taken away from them."

It's an uphill fight. The families -- and the court -- have found themselves at the center of a medical-political firestorm. Scientists are split on whether there is a link between widespread use of vaccines containing thimerosal and a dramatic increase in autism cases. Congress has debated banning the additive and protecting drug companies from being sued because of it. No court has ruled in favor of either side.

Although some medical groups have successfully urged drugmakers to remove thimerosal from most childhood vaccines, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said this month it saw no need to warn parents this fall's flu shots -- recommended for all children 6 to 24 months old -- will contain the additive.

"There is no evidence of harm caused by the minute doses of thimerosal in vaccines," the CDC said. The agency's decision is driven by fears of a deadly flu epidemic in light of estimates that 36,000 people die from the flu each year. The American Academy of Pediatrics agreed with the CDC. The academy says there is no connection between thimerosal and autism but has nonetheless urged drugmakers to produce thimerosal-free vaccines.

"Until an adequate supply of each vaccine is available, use of vaccines which contain thimerosal as a preservative is acceptable," the academy told its 57,000 member physicians this month.

Vaccine makers also deny a link, saying they voluntarily removed thimerosal from most childhood shots as a precaution.

"The company believes that these lawsuits and claims are completely without merit and will vigorously defend against them," pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. says in its 2002 annual report.

On the other hand, controversial research presented at a February meeting of the Institute of Medicine's Immunization Safety Review Committee showed the link between thimerosal and autism is greater than that between smoking and lung cancer.

U.S. Rep. **Dave Weldon**, R-Fla., called the CDC's position "malpractice" as he proposed legislation this month to ban thimerosal in all vaccines by the end of next year. Each thimerosal-free shot would cost an extra \$4, "a price worth paying," said Weldon, a Melbourne physician.

"We get all in a whirlwind about secondhand smoke. We shut down office buildings because of minimal levels of asbestos. We take these great precautions, and then we inject mercury into babies," he said. "I don't know all the answers, but I do know that it's been pretty well established in the scientific community that mercury is bad for you."

Gun and trigger

Weldon tells the story of a Washington, D.C., high school shut down by the Environmental Protection Agency for a month last year after a mercury spill.

"The mercury levels were substantially lower than what we were injecting into millions of newborn babies in the '90s," he said. The vast majority of those children weren't affected. But some, like Lanier Weed, have a genetic condition that leaves them

unable to excrete metals like mercury normally, said Boyd Haley, chairman of the University of Kentucky chemistry department. "It's a genetic susceptibility to an environmental situation," Leslie Weed said. "The genetics were her loaded gun, and the mercury was the trigger."

Five years ago, Katheryn Hartigan of Arlington gave birth to triplets. At first, all three children developed normally. But at 21 months, son Conner, the smallest and sickest of the three, began to regress, throwing tantrums, not speaking and wearing a blank, emotionless expression. He was diagnosed as autistic.

Hartigan and her husband, Timothy, blame a combination of thimerosal and mercury emissions from the JEA Northside Generating Station across the river from their home.

"You've got mercury on top of mercury," Timothy Hartigan said. Like the Hartigans, most of the Jacksonville families with claims pending before the Vaccine Court have notified JEA of their intent to sue, Pickert said. JEA doesn't discuss pending litigation, a spokeswoman said.

The cumulative effects of that much mercury can be devastating to infants whose immune systems aren't developed and who lack the ability to excrete metals, Haley said. Children who got the normal battery of vaccines in the late 1990s received 187.5 micrograms of mercury, more than the Environmental Protection Agency mercury limit of 0.1 micrograms per kilogram of body weight per day. A kilogram equals 2.2 pounds.

"What really makes thimerosal toxic is the administration at an early age," Haley said. Healthy children and adults can absorb more mercury in their systems, he said.

Haley studied normal and autistic children and found those with autism had significantly lower levels of mercury in their hair, meaning they weren't excreting. The lower the levels, the more severe their autism, he found.

Other scientists have used CDC data on children who received thimerosal-free vaccines and those who didn't to establish a correlation between the additive and autism. That research was

criticized by the American Academy of Pediatrics for using the data improperly.

"No scientific data link thimerosal used as a preservative in vaccines with any pediatric neurologic disorder, including autism," the academy wrote its 57,000 member physicians last year.

U.S. health officials point to a 2003 study that showed low autism rates in Danish children whether they received thimerosal-free vaccines or not. But Haley said children in Denmark are vaccinated later and with lower doses than American kids.

Vaccine makers and some scientists also say ethyl mercury, the type in thimerosal, is more easily purged from the body than methyl mercury, the type found in industrial emissions. The problem, Weldon said, is that no one at the CDC calculated how much mercury American children were receiving, and "my peers in the medical profession rely very heavily on the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics."

So do parents.

"We rely strictly on our physicians. We rely strictly on . . . who's approving these vaccines," said Timothy Hartigan. "We're not against shots, but who can you trust?"

Aventis Pasteur, the only company licensed to make flu shots for infants, said it is making the shots with and without thimerosal and should have enough thimerosal-free vaccines to meet demand this fall, a spokesman told the Los Angeles Times. The company encouraged concerned parents to ask their pediatricians to order thimerosal-free vaccines.

And Leslie Weed urged all parents to ask to see the package insert listing vaccine ingredients.

"It's not the vaccines that are poisoning the children. It's the poison in the vaccines," she said.

Altered lives

Bruce Anderson is haunted by the memory of holding down his screaming son, Ryan, while the infant received vaccines that Anderson now believes were poison.

Like most parents, Anderson, a former prosecutor, thought he was doing the responsible thing by getting his son vaccinated. He didn't know about mercury until it was too late. Shortly after Ryan's first birthday in 1999, the boy stopped talking, couldn't stand to be touched and developed digestive problems.

"He basically went into his own world. He lost the skills he had been forming and made zero progress. . . . You can have a normal child and have them fall off the map," said Anderson, now an attorney in Jacksonville Beach. "When my wife first brought up the issue of vaccines, my first reaction was, 'Show me the proof.' I couldn't believe our government would allow this to happen. I couldn't believe pediatricians would allow it to happen."

He learned about thimerosal at a conference sponsored by the Autism Research Institute in 2001.

"I'm sitting there with thousands of other parents, quietly crying, thinking, 'I did this,' " Anderson said. "What's so maddening is that the truth was known before my child was born."

He and his wife stopped calling Ryan autistic and started calling him "vaccine-injured." They began an "exhausting" journey through expensive therapy, special diets and autism conferences. Other parents say their lives also were turned upside down by the diagnosis. Some avoid going out in public with their children. Work schedules change. Nerves are constantly on edge. And time spent alone together is almost unheard of.

A few weeks ago, the Hartigans had tickets to the ice show. Katheryn Hartigan took the girls. Her husband took Conner to the beach.

Katheryn Hartigan said she has been made to feel like a criminal for refusing vaccinations for her children.

"We know as parents that we have done this to our child because we listened to the authorities," she said. "One day when he gets old enough to understand, I'm going to have to look him in the eye and tell him it was the shots and the area of town that Mommy and Daddy chose to live in that did this to you, and I am so sorry from the bottom of my heart."

Leslie Weed said she uses her husband's frequent flier miles -- he's a sought-after golf course architect -- to travel to autism conferences and demand answers from the speakers there. "It's changed our life," Bobby Weed said. "It's changed my relationship with my wife. It's changed our relationship with our children. It's changed our relationship with our family. But in a way, it's made us stronger. I have to look at the positive. . . . I've seen a side of my wife that I never knew existed."

The Weeds estimate spending \$50,000 a year just on treating Lanier and learning more about mercury poisoning. They feel fortunate, guilty almost, that they have the means to hire specialists and therapists and travel to conferences when other families don't.

The three shelves of a large hutch in their living room are filled with research Leslie Weed has collected in her search for truth. But perhaps the most telling document is taped inside the door. It's a letter Lanier's sister Haley, then 10, wrote.

"Why? Why? Why did the doctors poison Lanier?" Haley Weed wondered. "I really want to know. Tell me! Tell me! TELL ME!!!!!! The only thing that I want is to know why. Please God! Please."