

Statement on proposed thimerosal legislation

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Passage of legislation banning thimerosal preservatives in all vaccines would be detrimental to the health of New Mexicans including children.

Thimerosal has been used as an additive to vaccines since the 1930's because it is very effective in killing bacteria used in several vaccines and for preventing bacterial contamination, particularly in open multi-dose containers. In the late 1990's, because of concerns that infants receiving multiple vaccinations in the first two years of life might be exposed to more mercury (from thimerosal and other environmental sources) than recommended by federal guidelines, thimerosal free vaccines for young children became the norm. These thimerosal free vaccines needed to be produced as single dose units, more expensive than the older thimerosal containing vaccines.

The American Academy of Pediatrics believes that we should not compromise the health of children by withholding recommended immunizations. This influenza season, many pediatric practices in New Mexico did not receive all the influenza vaccine requested. Most state pediatricians get vaccines through the Department of Health Vaccines for Children Program in order to avoid a two tier system in providing vaccines. We were able to use the thimerosal free vaccine for the younger children and the thimerosal containing vaccines for the older children. Thus children with chronic conditions such as asthma, children with immunocompromised relatives, with siblings under six months of age could be protected from getting and passing on influenza. Currently thimerosal free influenza vaccine is approximately 24 % more expensive than the thimerosal containing vaccine. If only thimerosal free vaccine had been available, far fewer doses of vaccine would have been available and far fewer children would have been protected. Utilizing both thimerosal containing and thimerosal free influenza vaccine is the best use of our vaccine resources. In the future we will need more doses of vaccine. A recent New England Journal of Medicine (December 15, 2005) article on "Influenza Associated Deaths Among Children in the United States" states that 47% of these deaths occurred in children who had been healthy, suggesting that "a higher priority should be given to improvements in influenza vaccine coverage".

We agree with the American Academy of Pediatrics that states that we must reduce the exposure to mercury in our environment, especially for young children. However, we are also very concerned that a law banning thimerosal in vaccines may endanger our entire immunization program. Thimerosal free vaccines are exposed to thimerosal during the manufacturing process. The thimerosal is removed so that only trace amount (i.e. less than 12.5 ng mercury/dose of Pediarix) remain. If legislation is passed that bans all vaccines that have even been exposed to thimerosal we will be unable to utilize several combination vaccines that are currently available to protect the children of New Mexico.

This proposed legislation sets a very bad precedent for making health policy. Lawmakers have an obligation to protect the interests of all of their constituents, not just those of a vocal minority, and to do so with the scientific evidence informing their decisions. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the safety and efficacy of childhood vaccines-whether they contain thimerosal preservative, have only trace amounts of thimerosal, or are preservative-free.

Our governor and legislators must show the leadership needed, especially when at the same time, First Lady Barbara Richardson has shown leadership in the past two years to increase the immunization rates of New Mexico's children. The larger risks of not vaccinating children far outweigh any possible risks of exposure to thimerosal containing vaccines. Immunizations prevent many severe and even life threatening diseases. The children of New Mexico must not lose those benefits.