

## Mercury in vaccines not cause of autism, study finds

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MONTREAL - A new Quebec study casts doubt on the popular theory that mercury poisoning from childhood vaccinations can cause autism.

The theory has prevailed despite several previous studies around the world that have failed to find any connection between autism and common childhood vaccines containing mercury.

But the unique Quebec study, which is to be published next month in *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, could have a big impact on the debate.

Quebec changed its vaccine formula 10 years ago, Eric Fombonne, chief of pediatric psychiatry at the McGill University Health Centre, told the 10th International Child Neurology Congress being held in Montreal.



CREDIT: Julie Oliver, Ottawa Citizen

The belief that mercury in vaccines causes autism has prevailed despite studies that have proven no correlation.

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Since 1996, Quebec children have received vaccines without the mercury-based preservative thimerosal, Fombonne said.

He compared autism rates among kids before the vaccine changed and after.

"My study is very clear in showing that there's no relationship between the level of exposure to thimerosal in vaccine and autism," Fombonne said in an interview.

"In fact, in my study the incidence of (autism) is higher in the years when there was no mercury."

Some desperate parents, convinced that mercury poisoning is responsible for their child's condition, have turned to chelation therapy, an unproven treatment that purports to remove heavy metals from the body, in the hopes that it will cure the neurological and developmental disorder.

At least one child has died because of the process, Fombonne said.

"Now these methods are making inroads into Canada," he said.

An anti-vaccine hysteria gripped British parents after an infamous study purportedly linked the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine with autism.

The 1998 study has since been discredited, but in the meantime many parents refused to

inoculate their children, leading to a resurgence of infectious diseases such as measles.

Autism is a disorder that impairs a child's ability to communicate and interact with others.

Fombonne's department sees about 350 new cases every year, but there's no "autism epidemic," he said.

The definition of autism has broadened to include more children with a wide range of difficulties.

An estimated 200,000 Canadians are living with the disorder, a prevalence of about 65 for every 10,000 people.

"What we need is treatment and services and support for people, and right across their lifespan," said Louise Fleming, executive director of Autism Society Canada.

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