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COMMENTARY

# Vaccines and Autism

By ARI BROWN  
October 27, 2007; Page A8

Dangerous vaccines that harm kids. An epidemic of disabled children, hurt by an uncaring medical establishment.

Sounds like a B-grade Hollywood thriller. But this is supposedly a true story as told by actress Jenny McCarthy, author of the best seller, "Louder Than Words: A Mother's Journey in Healing Autism."

When I heard Ms. McCarthy tell Oprah and Larry King that vaccines caused her son's autism, I had a flashback to a cold winter's night, 13 years ago. I was the senior pediatric resident on call in the Intensive Care Unit. Cradled in the arms of her parents, a seven-year-old girl was brought to the emergency room at Children's Hospital Boston. The girl had come down with chickenpox a few days earlier -- she had a fever and hundreds of itchy skin lesions. That night, she had taken a turn for the worse. Her fever shot up to 106 and she became confused and lethargic. She was unresponsive and limp in her mother's arms.

The ER doctors suspected that her open sores allowed Strep bacteria to get under her skin and rage through her bloodstream. Now she was in "multiple system organ failure" -- every square inch of her body was shutting down all at once. IVs were placed into her veins to start fluids, antibiotics and medications to stabilize her heart and blood pressure. She was placed on a ventilator machine to breathe. Then she was brought to the Intensive Care Unit.

By the time I met my patient, she had tubes coming out of every opening and weeping skin lesions all over her body. I was used to blood

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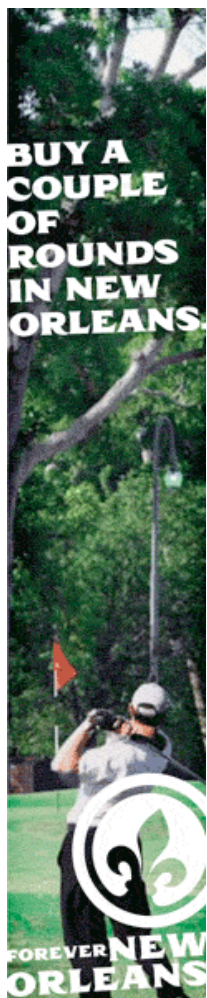
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and gore, but it was hard to look at her and not cry. Imagine how her parents felt when they saw their once-beautiful little girl in this grotesque state, struggling to survive.

My attending physician told me to grab dinner. This child would need me for the rest of the night. I returned to the ICU to find that my patient had gone into cardiac arrest and died. I watched, helplessly, as the nurses placed the little girl into a body bag.

Fast forward five months: The first chickenpox vaccine was approved. That day, I vowed never to let a child on my watch suffer from a disease that was preventable by vaccination.

That's a story that doesn't grab headlines or guest shots on Larry King. Vaccines are one of mankind's greatest scientific achievements. This year alone, they prevented 14 million infections, \$40 billion in medical costs, and most important, 33,000 deaths. Yet vaccines are victims of their own success. Today's parents are unfamiliar with the diseases they prevent, but these diseases are alive and well in the U.S. -- I have personally seen children suffer from them.

Call it the New McCarthyism: Who cares about 100 years of scientific research? Vaccines are evil, because the Internet says they are. When a well-meaning parent like Ms. McCarthy blames vaccines for her child's autism, it's dangerous. Celebrity books come and go, but the anxiety they create lives on in pediatricians' offices across the country. A small but growing number of parents are even lying about their religious beliefs to avoid having their children vaccinated, thanks in part to the media hysteria created by this book.

Parents go through stages of grief when their child is diagnosed with a disorder like autism. We all want to blame someone for our suffering. That's understandable. Was there something we could have done as parents to prevent this? But why hasn't the media called out Ms. McCarthy on all the medical inaccuracies in her book? Has anyone actually read it? I have -- cover to cover. Here are two revealing points:

Ms. McCarthy told Oprah that her son was a normal toddler until he received his Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccine (at 15 months of age). Soon after -- boom -- the soul is gone from his eyes. Yet she contradicts herself in her book: "My friends' babies all cracked a smile way before Evan did . . . he was almost five months old." Which is it? Was he normal until his MMR vaccine or were some of the signs missed before he got that shot?

Ms. McCarthy also contends that mercury in vaccines caused damage to her son's gut and immune system, leading to autism. Yet the mercury preservative Ms. McCarthy assails was removed from the childhood vaccination series in 2001. Her son, Evan, was born in 2002. It's hard to trust Ms. McCarthy's medical degree from the University of Google -- she comments about the Hepatitis C vaccine that wreaked havoc on a friend's child. An inconvenient truth: There is no Hepatitis C vaccine.

Doctors do need to do a better job of guiding families through the maze of autism treatments. I also desperately want to know why autism happens and how to treat it. But let's put our energy into funding autism research and treatment, not demonizing our vaccination program.

Ms. McCarthy is in the trenches, fighting for her son. I, too, am fighting. I am on the front lines everyday, trying to keep our kids healthy and protected. And, after all I have seen, one thing is certain -- I've vaccinated my own kids and would do it again in a heartbeat.

***Dr. Brown, a pediatrician in Austin, Texas, is a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics.***

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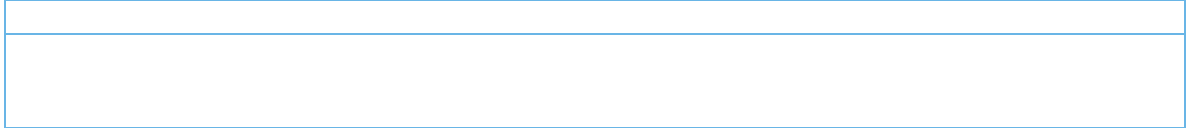
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