

Experts hear testimony on whooping cough vaccine

WASHINGTON (AP) — A panel of experts heard conflicting views Wednesday on whether the vaccine used to prevent whooping cough is safe or can cause brain damage and death in some children.

Officials of the the American Academy of Pediatrics maintained that there is no scientific proof the vaccine causes severe neurological damage or death, but said it can worsen pre-existing problems or bring them to light where they had previously been unknown.

Others, including some parents, disagreed and said the government is trying to downplay the risks.

The Institute of Medicine panel of 12 medical and public health experts was formed at the request of the Department of Health and Human Services to review scientific data on possible problems resulting from vaccines that prevent pertussis, or whooping cough, and rubella, better known as German measles. The review is required by Congress.

Jeffrey H. Schwartz, a Washington lawyer who says his daughter's death from a seizure in 1984 was diagnosed as caused by the pertussis vaccine, charged that the government has been engaged in "a conspiracy of silence and deni-

al" by withholding information about the danger of the vaccine.

He said the more than 1,000 reported cases of severe pertussis vaccine reactions are being brushed off as anecdotal with no scientific basis.

Government public health officials, in their zeal to promote mass immunizations to wipe out contagious diseases, are deliberately understating the severe side effects the pertussis vaccine can cause, he said.

The vaccine for the disease is usually given in one shot with the vaccine for diphtheria and tetanus, which together are referred to as the DPT vaccine, to children in a series of four shots beginning at around 2 months. It is required by state laws for admission to school.

"We have not advocated that parents not get the vaccine," Schwartz said. "But we are pushing for a safer vaccine" and more caution in giving the vaccine to children who have a family history of seizures or have had a severe reaction to an earlier DPT shot.

Schwartz spoke on behalf of Dissatisfied Parents Together, a nationwide group of parents whose children have been injured or killed by childhood vaccines. His group was instrumental in pushing through the

National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, which required the vaccine review and established a federal compensation program for families.

Marge Grant of Beaver Dam, Wis., told the panel about her son who, after his third DPT shot in 1961 when he was a healthy and active 6-month-old, "literally wilted before our eyes." Now, at age 28, he is a mentally retarded, spastic quadriplegic who requires total care, she said.

"Parents must be given full disclosure of what adverse events can and do occur from all vaccines," she said. "Parents must be told what the symptoms are like, so they will recognize them as vaccine-related."

The vast majority of pediatricians tell parents that pertussis vaccine can cause soreness at the injection site, fever and in rare cases, possible permanent

brain damage, said Dr. James Strain, executive director of the academy, in a telephone interview from Elk Grove, Chicago.

He said that if the vaccine does cause permanent brain damage, it would be at the rate of about one in 300,000.

But Dr. Stanley Plotkin, an official of the American Academy of Pediatrics and a pediatrics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said there are no scientific data that show the pertussis vaccine causes severe neurological damage or death. However, the vaccine can bring to light or exacerbate pre-existing conditions, he said.

"A case has not been proven for any of the serious reactions caused by either of the two vaccines discussed today," he said. "These are terrible stories, regrettable ... but there are other causes of brain damage and death."

He disputed contentions that

a pertussis vaccine being used in Japan is safer and just as effective as the one used in the United States. Applications to approve this vaccine are pending at the Food and Drug Administration.

"Because there's so much emotional energy (around the pertussis vaccine) one way of shortcutting that would be to license this other vaccine," he said. "But I'm concerned that coincidental catastrophes wouldn't stop happening to small children."

Plotkin also downplayed reports that arthritis may be associated with the rubella vaccine when given to adult women. He said that in about 25 percent of the cases, women have "aches and pains" but that the symptoms usually last only for a few days.

"We have no reason to believe it's anything more than that," he said.

Harris named first black woman Air Force general

BILOXI, Miss. (AP) — Col. Marcelite J. Harris will become the first black woman to hold the rank of Air Force brigadier general, Pentagon officials announced Wednesday.

Harris, 46, was born in Houston, Texas. A 1964 graduate of Spelman College in Atlanta, she also earned a degree in business management at the University of Maryland.

As the Air Force's first woman aircraft maintenance officer, she rose through the ranks in that specialty until 1975, when she was named personnel staff

officer at Air Force Headquarters in Washington.

She also served as a White House social aide to President Jimmy Carter.

In 1981 she was named the first woman maintenance squadron commander in the Strategic Air Command at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. In March 1986, she was in charge of all maintenance at Keesler Air Force Base.

Her decorations include the Bronze Star and the Meritorious Service Medal with four oak leaf clusters.

Other Noriega confused for deposed Panamanian leader

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Manuel Noriega is free and living in Miami Beach.

This Noriega, however says he is receiving harassing calls from people who apparently have him confused with his notorious namesake.

"They have been very nasty calls. I try to explain. 'Look, you're talking to the wrong guy,'" said the 84-year-old U.S. Navy veteran, a native of Mexico.

He is the only Manuel Noriega listed the telephone

book covering Miami, where deposed Panamanian ruler Manuel Antonio Noriega was arraigned last week on drug trafficking charges.

The Miami Beach Noriega worked for the Latin American division of DuPont before retiring and heads an export business.

In Mexico, the father of Miami Beach's Noriega appeared in dozens of movies.

"There's no comparison," said Manuel E. Noriega of the fallen dictator.

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