

Olmsted Lied, People Laughed: The “Amish Anomaly” hoax

By David N. Brown

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Dan Olmsted's “big break” for coverage of the vaccine-caused autism coverage was a series of stories about two claims: that the Amish do not vaccinate, and that they do not have autism. He wrote at least six articles on this subject between March and October 2005. To this day, he continues to defend his work. Yet, his critics have long since demonstrated 3 facts: The Amish vaccinate; they do have children with autism, and Olmsted would have known these facts if he had actually conducted a serious investigation.

A major argument by Olmsted is an [interview](#) with Dr. Frank C. Noonan, said (apparently in his own words) to have treated “thousands and thousands” of the Amish population of Lancaster county. This provided a major recurring sound bite: “You’ll find all the other stuff, but we don’t find the autism. We’re right in the heart of Amish country and seeing none, and that’s just the way it is.” However, by Olmsted's admission, Noonan is openly a practitioner of “alternative medicine”, which makes him potentially biased. Nor is he the only source with this problem. Dick Warner, a salesman Olmsted was mocked for quoting in the June 2 article “A Glimpse of the Amish”, sold “natural health” products as well as water filters. Dr. Lawrence Leichtman, reportedly instrumental in guiding Olmsted to six Amish children with autism, was featured in the April 2005 issue of *Alternative Medicine*. Heng Wang, another prominently cited source, may also have “alternative health” ties: The site of his DDC clinic lists nutrition and special diets as among its services, without going into details. (The site reports that the clinic was founded on the initiative of mothers who, for unspecified reasons were unsatisfied with services at Holmes Morton's Clinic for Special Children.) This preponderance of “alternative health” sources raises questions not only about the objectivity of the article, but also the extent of Olmsted's personal research. This is a good point to note a comment by Kevin A. Strauss to Autism NewsBeat: “I don’t think he spent much time in Lancaster County.”

But, complaining about bias will not help address Olmsted's claims. With regards to Noonan's quote, I am convinced that it is in one way or another, spurious. For one thing, the listed location of his practice is a single suite, an improbably small space for treating “thousands” Amish or otherwise. For another, Noonan's practice is *not* particularly accessible to the Amish. Ephrata has a well-documented *Mennonite* community, but I can find no reference to a directly adjacent Amish population, unless one counts the Peaceful Valley Amish Furniture store. By all indications, the Amish population is concentrated south and east, closer to Strasburg and Lancaster itself (both filming locations for *Witness*). Thus, it is very unlikely that Noonan ever had more than occasional contact with the Amish in a professional capacity, except possibly with a small subset of the Amish who are either relatively geographically isolated from the rest, or who prefer his practice over larger facilities closer at hand.

In any event, Olmsted's claims quickly collapsed in the eyes of science and his peers. Olmsted himself admitted that the Amish have some autistics and that at least some vaccinate. Even his strikingly qualified claims were disproved virtually as soon as others investigated. In March 2006, Drs. Kevin Strauss, Holmes Morton and others documented 9 autistic Amish children, which could raise the autism rate of tLancaster Amish community Olmsted supposedly investigated to almost 1/5,000 all by themselves. In December 2006, a study found that 84% of Amish parents reported vaccinating their

children. As criticism spread to Olmstead's journalist peers, his honesty was directly challenged. In 2007, the Columbia Journalism Review concluded "that Olmsted has made up his mind on the question and is reporting the facts that support his conclusions." In the unkindest cut of all, UPI has apparently deleted Olmsted's articles from its website, as specific links for Olmsted's articles only lead to the UPI front page.

Throughout this fiasco, Olmstead's responses have amounted to revisions and rationalizations at best, and at worst complete denial. When he first reported finding some autistic Amish (April 18), he tried to blame it on vaccinations among a minority of the Amish. When he acknowledged autism in a number of unvaccinated children, he blamed "elevated levels of mercury". And when on-line critics began systematic demolition, he responded with *ad hominem* attacks on critics, including a reference to Kathleen Seidel as "toxic". At last report, he was if anything even more defensively strident. On April 4, 2009, he made an AoA post in which he continued to defend his core claims. He repeated his belief in "the virtual absence of autism among the Amish", based on an undoubted underestimate of the autism rate as 1/10,000, and said that only "half" of Amish are vaccinated. He blamed his failure to consult the Clinic for Special Children on the clinic staff, claiming they "refused to speak with me over a period of many months" Then he said this: "(T)hat doctor said, oh yes, they do see Amish kids with autism -- but then went on to say those were ONLY kids with other identifiable genetic disorders... He specifically said they DO NOT see 'idiopathic autism,' a basically nonsense phrase that he used to mean autism without any other accompanying disorders. In other words, they don't see the kind of autism now running at a rate of 1 in 100 or so in the rest of the country. "

With this remarkable bit of "newspeak", Olmsted does exactly what Prometheus speculated happened in the original articles: "Mr. Olmsted found autistic children, but didn't count them – either because he either didn't feel that they had *real* autism or because it conflicted with his forgone conclusion." His specific argument is obviously worthless: Defining "real" autism by the absence of "accompanying disorders" is absolutely indefensible, especially for the Amish, who are *all* at an elevated risk of genetic defects. Furthermore, if autism *were* redefined in this matter, many if not most of the diagnoses behind the 1/100 figure would have to be thrown out. In a culminating irony, Olmsted himself openly refers to "idiopathic autism" as a "nonsense phrase". So, why is he using this to define who is or is not autistic. By all appearances, it is because he would rather endorse "nonsense" than retract his long-since indefensible conclusion!

In short, Olmstead's "coverage" of autism has been fraudulent from the start. At best (and I think most likely), he uncritically interviewed a handful of prejudiced informants, and misrepresented it in the national media as his own, comprehensive investigation of Lancaster County. At worst, he conducted research more than sufficient to show that autism occurred among the Amish at a high rate and independent of vaccination, but knowingly misrepresented, omitted or refused to pursue the relevant facts.

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