

Age of Hypocrisy: Age of Autism's Conflict of Interest

By David N. Brown

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Currently, one of the highest-profile organization promoting the “theory” of vaccines causing autism is Age Of Autism. Like all promoters of this urban legend, AoA is quick to attack those who promote vaccination and/or deny that vaccines cause autism as “shills” for “Big Pharma”. For example, a February 16 (2009) article attacking Paul Offit was headlined, **Voting Himself Rich: CDC Vaccine Adviser Made \$29 Million Or More After Using Role to Create Market.** Such *ad hominem* slurs have long been a nearly universal defense of their long-debunked allegation against any and all detractors, including those (eg. Kathleen Seidel) who have absolutely no publicly acknowledged connection to vaccine research, manufacturing or distribution. It is long since time to turn the tables and ask, “Where is Age of Autism's money coming from?”

At least AoA is not at all evasive or subdued in giving an answer: Their primary sponsor, presented very prominently at the top of their home page and also in many of their web posts, is Lee Silsby Pharmaceuticals. If one goes to Lee Silsby's page (as can be done directly through a link on AoA's site), one will find that this company markets an impressive range of medications expressly for treating autism. Among these products are EDTAs- the chemicals used in chelation therapy.

Chelation therapy is the most prominent “quack” treatment for autism. Interestingly, chelation achieved notoriety well before it was suggested for autism in particular. Way back in 1989, FDA Consumer published an article listing chelation among “The Top Ten Health Frauds”. (see quackwatch.com) Its use for autism was based solely on the claim(s) that autism was caused by mercury, *and* that the specific source of the mercury was thimerosal used in vaccines. (On consideration, this claim would have been indefensible even if a link between autism and mercury had been established: Given the frequency and diversity of mercury pollution and the cumulative nature of mercury poisoning, seeking *any* single “cause” would be like looking for one particular needle in a stack of needles.) It was supposed that if autism was caused by mercury in vaccines, then it could be “cured” simply by removing the mercury. (Once again, the reasoning is grossly flawed even if mercury causation is assumed: Removing the poison alone is never a cure for the harm it may have done.) Age of Autism has joined with other “anti-vaccine” autism groups in promoting chelation therapy for autism, even after a scandal caused by the death of Tariq Nadama at the hands of Roy Kerry.

What this means in economic terms that Age of Autism's activities directly serve the commercial interests of Lee Silsby, at the direct expense of that company's competitors. By accepting funds from Lee Silsby, Age of Autism creates a clear conflict of interest for both parties. In fact, both could easily be sued by the companies whose vaccines AoA criticizes. (Compare the long-running case of Amway V. Procter & Gamble over the role of some Amway distributors in circulating the “P&G-Satanism” urban legend.) If the issue were pressed in court, there is a very good chance that tAoA's message would be classified as libel, especially where (as is usual) they not only allege vaccines to be unsafe but accuse manufacturers of intentional misconduct. (The most likely reason why the members of “Big Pharma” haven't already sued is that they don't care enough about vaccines to take such an action- much less, of course, fund the massive coverup of vaccine injuries which AoA et al imagine.)

So, does this mean Age of Autism is merely a “shill” for Lee Silsby, the same way they allege that their

own opponents are lackeys for Big Pharma? ***Almost certainly not.*** Even granting that Lee Silsby may well be donating to AoA for reasons of economic self-interest, that is much more simply accounted for as a convergence of interests than as a truly collaborative venture. In all likelihood, most of the people at Age of Autism are reasonably sincere, and would present the same message if they had different sponsors or none. It can further be said that even open-and-shut cases of scientific fraud rarely boil down to something as simple as the culprit faking whatever will make him money. (See “Does Fraud Need a Profit Motive?”) Perhaps this is because the complete opportunist lacks the resolution to attain even minimal credentials, or simply recognizes that larger gains can be made more quickly and easily by other means.

What this does mean is that, by treating real or alleged “conflicts of interest” as a central issue, Age of Autism and other “anti-vax” groups only set themselves up for retaliation in kind. It would seem entirely fitting to do so, at least until they themselves advance to some logically sound and intellectually honest mode of debate. But one should be restrained by an observation by C.S. Lewis on such tactics, which he dubbed “Bulverism”: “The modern method is to assume without discussion that (someone) is wrong, and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly... I see Bulverism at work in every political argument... Each side snatches it early as a weapon against the other, and between the two reason itself is discredited.” Ultimately, such “debate” cannot end in anything but a draw, which may be all a charlatan or fanatic aims for to begin with. Rather than using “retaliation” as rebuttal in itself, it should be used to drive home something like Lewis's point: Either side of any debate can denigrate the other for its biases, ties and interests. For anyone to draw a truly informed and reasonable conclusion on vaccine safety or any other, he/she must look only at which side is best supported by verifiable facts and the rules of logic and the scientific method. By these standards, Age of Autism has nothing, and no ad hominem attack on the motives and character of their own critics can change that fact.

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