

# Dissecting the Whistleblower Documents

Brian S. Hooker, Ph.D., P.E.

Science Advisor, Focus for Health

May 27, 2016

September 18, 2002

CAPT Melinda Wharton, Director, ESD

Letter of Reprimand

CAPT Robert Chen, Chief, Immunization Safety Branch (ISB), Epidemiology and Surveillance Division (ESD), NIP, PHS 54161

## LETTER OF REPRIMAND

CDC-wide space constraints have forced us to double up contractors and trainees in our Division two to an office. You also raised the issue (which you have raised previously in public settings) that vaccine safety research should be conducted outside of NIP because of the perception of conflict of interest.

## Page 5 – Letter of Reprimand

On September 12, I learned of a discussion of the discovery motion that took place by conference call on August 7, while I was on annual leave. The call included NIP staff, members of other Federal agencies, and other persons. Persons who participated in that call have reported to me that during this conference call, you expressed your concerns about the amount of work that this discovery motion would result in for your staff. A staff person from another agency tried to reassure you that others would assist, and this was not expected to be a recurring problem, but you responded that if you had a gun you would shoot all of them. (Accounts I have received are not consistent on whether it was “you” or “them.”)

October 7, 2002

CAPT Robert Chen, Chief, Immunization Safety Branch (ISB)  
Epidemiology and Surveillance Division (ESD), NIP, CDC (PHS 54161)

Request for Withdrawal of Letter of Reprimand dated September 18, 2002

ASG Walter A. Orenstein, Director, NIP

Unlike most of immunizations, however, one of the greatest challenges of the field of vaccine safety is its "no win" situation. If we find no association between a vaccine exposure and an untoward event (as we usually do), those who believe in a causative association accuse us of a "cover up". When we do find an association, those promoting vaccination demand high levels of proof, and are occasionally hostile. To overcome these very powerful disincentives and pressures, my team at ISB and our external partners have had to foster our innate scientific curiosity, a respect for the truth, and the willingness to speak out on the facts for the larger public good.



This past year has been an unusually stressful one to add to an already stressful arena. The House Committee on Government Reform demanded release of confidential patient records, resulting in our having to make substantial and complicated changes in how we conduct vaccine safety research and handle its data. Thimerosal-related litigation is threatening the viability of the vaccine injury compensation process. The events of last September 11 and bioterrorism fears have forced us to prepare for massive smallpox vaccination. All of these events increase our workload in vaccine safety and create multiple opportunities for misunderstanding and turmoil.

Finally, one institution critical to the system of aviation safety is missing in the vaccine arena: the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). This small, non-regulatory, independent and highly respected agency seeks to proactively prevent and/or reduce the severity of future accidents. It provides independent oversight of the transportation system by monitoring the effectiveness of regulatory bodies at various government levels. The NTSB seeks to gain public trust by its independence, objectivity, technical competence and proactive stance on prevention. By partnering with industry and other government entities during its investigations, the NTSB not only works efficiently but also gains consensus on its recommendations. As the immunization schedule grows increasing complex (Fig. 2), the vaccine community may best increase the likelihood of adding more societal value via vaccinations, by creating National Immunization Safety Boards. <sup>1</sup>

**From:** Thompson, William  
**Sent:** Sunday, October 20, 2002 2:50 PM  
**To:** Orenstein, Walt  
**Cc:** Snider, Dixie; Malone, Kevin M.; Thompson, William  
**Subject:** RE: Dr. Robert Chen's Reprimand

Walt,

All I can say right now is that I am extremely depressed. I have put 2 years of my life into NIP and I think it was unfair to reprimand Bob Chen, my boss, and his dedicated staff. I'll leave it at that and hopefully we can put this whole thing past us. I will probably pull my name from the list of authors on the MMR/Autism MADDSP paper because I don't feel supported in the current environment. I hope you understand that decision.

Sincerely,

Bill

“I will probably pull my name from the list of authors on the MMR/Autism MADDSP paper because I don't feel supported in the current environment.”

*This email was sent right after the results regarding African Americans were destroyed in the “trash can meeting.”*

## **Thompson, PerStephanie (CDC/OID/NCEZID)**

---

**From:** Yeargin-Aillsopp, Marshalyn (CDC/CCHP/NCBDDD)  
**Sent:** Monday, February 12, 2007 12:48 AM  
**To:** Boyle, Coleen (CDC/CCHP/NCBDDD); Davis, Robert L. (Bob) (CDC/OD/OCSO); Schuchat, Anne MD (CDC/CCID/NCIRD); Wharton, Melinda (CDC/CCID/NCIRD)  
**Cc:** Thompson, William (CDC/CCID/NCIRD)  
**Subject:** RE: Cleared Neurodevelopment Manuscript

Hi Bob and Bill,

I am sorry that I just got a chance to read the manuscript. I do have a couple of comments:

Since the participation rate was only 30% can you compare it to the larger sample to see how it might be different?

Although you are a bit tentative in your conclusions and Coleen suggests you could make it stronger, I think it is interesting that where there were negative effects, they are with the some of the same outcomes as from the other analyses (tics, articulation, suggesting overall speech and language disorders). Seems almost confirmatory. Also, from the standpoint of development, there should not be "equal" weight attached to all of these outcomes, so for example, a lowered "overall" IQ score or "verbal" score is more significant from a functioning standpoint than a low "performance" score (ask any parent -- which would you prefer for your child?)

Regarding thimerosal exposure, "I think it is interesting that where there were negative effects, they are with the (sic) some of the same outcomes as from the other analyses (tics, articulation, suggesting overall speech and language disorders). Seems almost confirmatory."

# Current CDC Statement on Thimerosal

*“There is no evidence of harm caused by the low doses of thimerosal in vaccines, except for minor reactions like redness and swelling at the injection site.”*