

When it Rains Man in Pours

By Reg P. Wydeven
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'Rain Man' was an excellent movie that was one of the first vehicles to really expose the world to the reality of autism. In an Oscar©-winning performance, Dustin Hoffman portrayed Raymond Babbitt, a man with autism who reunites with his brother, Charlie, played by Tom Cruise.

Raymond is shown as a lovable, quirky man who has certain deficiencies, but also displays flashes of mathematical brilliance. The movie shows some of the challenges families face when a loved one is diagnosed with autism. Unfortunately, these families got another setback last week.

A special U.S. vaccine court held that vaccines are not to blame for causing autism. The decision involving three separate cases came after parents of children with autism filed more than 5,000 claims since 2001 for compensation through the government's Vaccine Injury Compensation Program. The claims are reviewed by special masters serving on the U.S. Court of Claims.

In order to prevail, the families had the burden of proving that it was more likely than not that the autism symptoms in their children were directly related to a combination of the measles-mumps-rubella shots and other shots that at the time carried a mercury-containing preservative called thimerosal.

Much to the parents' dismay, the judges in the cases said the evidence was overwhelmingly contrary to the parents' claims, explaining that "the weight of scientific research and authority" was "simply more persuasive on nearly every point in contention." The court went on to say that "it was abundantly clear that petitioners' theories of causation were speculative and unpersuasive."

Not all hope is lost, however, as the court still has to rule on separate claims from other families who assert that as opposed to a specific vaccine combination, thimerosal by itself could be the root of the neurological disorder. Thimerosal is a preservative that is no longer used in most routine children's vaccines.

While the court has yet to rule on the claims that thimerosal alone is to blame, it still doesn't sound promising. In one of the holdings, a judge wrote that the families "failed to demonstrate that thimerosal-containing vaccines can contribute to causing immune dysfunction."

The court's decision is definitely disappointing for parents of children with autism. However, what's more disappointing is the fact that one of the possible causes of autism is now off the list, leaving the real cause unknown.

Experts now believe that the chance of a child being born with autism is 1 in 150, while males are four times more likely to have it than females. Autism is characterized by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests.

Autism varies widely in its severity and is difficult to diagnose, especially as symptoms oftentimes go unrecognized, especially in mildly affected children or when it is masked by more debilitating handicaps. If a doctor suspects autism, a comprehensive evaluation is needed. This involves a multidisciplinary team including a psychologist, neurologist, psychiatrist, speech therapist, and other professionals.

Hopefully, this setback will not deter researchers from rooting out the cause of autism. Who knows, maybe families struggling with autism will have a Hollywood ending after all.

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