

Testimony at House Human Services Committee

January 19, 2021 2:45 pm

Testimony ND HB 1306,

Chairman Weisz, Vice Chairman Rohr and members of the House Human Services Committee.

I am Mary Ann Sens from Grand Forks, ND. I appear today IN OPPOSITION to ND HB 1306, requesting a legislative management study to explore any interrelationship between SIDS, vaccines, and autism.

My background: I am a North Dakota Physician, pathologist and researcher. I am Professor and Chair of Pathology at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences. I am a forensic pathologist, so I directly witness the tragedy of sudden infant death in my profession. It is a profoundly sad event, forever tearing the family soul with the deaths of these babies. In forensic pathology, we deal with autism less commonly, but it is just as heartbreaking when an autistic child dies, usually in dangers they do not perceive. I also have autism in my family, so I know of the lifelong struggle of parents with these precious and special children.

In my professional background, I have over 120 peer-reviewed manuscripts, many on sudden death in infants. I have written 11 book chapters and just finished a 600 page book on Forensic Pathology. I have both a PhD in Inorganic Physical Chemistry and an MD degree. I am board certified in Anatomic and Forensic Pathology, serve as the Executive Vice President of the National Association of Medical Examiners and am active in many medical and pathology organizations.

I chose to study sudden death in infants under a very rigorous and scientific protocol involving over 50 experts from the National Institute of Health, Boston (Harvard), New York (Columbia University), Sanford Health / Avera (Dr. Elliott), South Africa (Stellenbosch University) and forensic pathologists in North and South Dakota and Capetown, SA. We studied 12,000 pregnancies, any miscarriages or sudden deaths and the health of the babies that resulted. Within the geographic areas, we also enrolled SIDS infants who were not in the initial cohort. We studied sudden death in infants in the most comprehensive study ever and discovered it is a complex disease or series of diseases. These diseases are affected by pre-natal environment, even paternal genetics. They are largely controlled by environmental factors, some preventable, others not. I am heavily involved with CDC efforts to identify risks and reduce sudden infant deaths, as demonstrated by several scientific papers. Our office has arranged for voluntary and consented collaboration with the renowned Lieber Institute for Brain Development. When a death is referred to our office, the next of kin for acceptable cases are offered the opportunity to donate their loved ones brain IF THEY DESIRE. There is no charge in our service to the family and no delays, regardless of the family decision. It is just an opportunity that may help advance knowledge in autism, PTSD, reactions to psychoactive drugs and other missions of Lieber institute that we cannot offer here. Autism is an extremely complex disease; this small action may assist in ultimately understanding, treating and preventing it.

Why I oppose this bill: There are numerous studies on vaccines, vaccine safety and reviewing claimed association with autism, SIDS and other disease. None have demonstrated credible evidence of a relationship with vaccines and SIDS or autism. The original and sensational paper by Andrew Wakefield in 1998 claiming a link between autism and vaccine administration in eight children, had serious flaws as written and should never have been published. The entire paper is now totally discredited, financial conflicts with authors identified, mistreatment of developmentally challenged children documented and elements of the manuscript fabricated. Mr. Wakefield had the most severe repercussions against him by British Medical Society, the stripping of his qualifications, he is no longer recognized as a physician in the UK.

In the wake of this article, which parents understandably grasped as a simple solution for this grave, lifelong and unknown disease their children had, numerous studies initially tried to repeat the findings, hoping to solidify a cure for autism, then began to question the entire premise when no reported data could be repeated. PubMed lists over 1,000 studies; none have demonstrated any causal link from vaccines to autism or SIDS. These studies are NOT just from CDC, not just from drug companies, not just from “one side” of this debate. The highest medical recognition is invitation to the National Academy of Medicine, formerly the Institute of Medicine. Fewer than 50 people across the world are asked to join each year and they conduct the highest level of thought and research findings. They challenged and changed medicine with noting preventable errors, demanding electronic records and checks, involving patients / parents in decision-making and many other medical questions of the highest order. They HAVE studied many aspects of vaccines. The NAM/IOM uniformly assert that there is no relationship with vaccines and two of the most complex diseases affecting our babies and children – Sudden death and autism. The simple “solution” of a vaccine has NOTHING to do with either of these conditions. This is repeatedly from the best medical and scientific minds on earth – with no government, drug or political connections. This group DOES identify other complications of vaccines and have detailed reports of the risks and complications of vaccination, including timing of vaccination. Vaccines DO NOT cause SIDS, SUDC, USDI and autism nor does vaccination change any risk for these conditions.

Further studying a phenomenon that has been rigorously studied without any shred of evidence of validity is a waste of resources and time but more importantly, it is cruel to parents and families of these precious children. We need to track these so we can look for solutions – the DOH is doing that. Those of us in research and forensic attempt to link families with the ability of consented studies whenever possible. Public health looks for trends. Bioinformatics scans for genes. Those of us in the fields realize how very complex these diseases are and continually strive to identify the complex environmental, pre-natal, genetic and epigenetic contributions.

In closing, I wish it were as simple as a shot. It is not. We cannot detract from public health efforts, science, genetics and painstaking review of cases for answers. We need finances for programs to console families with SIDS /SUDC losses. We need more programs for education, treatment and understanding of autism. We need to allow these precious children, like my nephew, to thrive their own way in our society. We need to advance science and real support programs, not a shot theory, disproven several times over.