

Hearing Gives Burton a Last Shot at Autism Issue

Indiana Republican plans to focus on environmental factors that could have effects on children's neurological systems



For more than a decade, Indiana Republican Dan Burton has been a leading House voice on autism and a proponent of the theory that mercury in vaccines contributes to the disorder. He held at least 20 hearings examining the potential link between the two during three terms as chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee and one as head of the panel's subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness, according to his office.

With about a month left before he retires, Burton will have one last chance to pursue the issue from his seat on the Oversight panel Thursday, when the panel holds a hearing on autism spectrum disorders. Burton said he plans to focus his questions on environmental factors — such as mercury or other contaminants in water — that have the potential to affect children's neurological systems, as well as the vaccine issue.

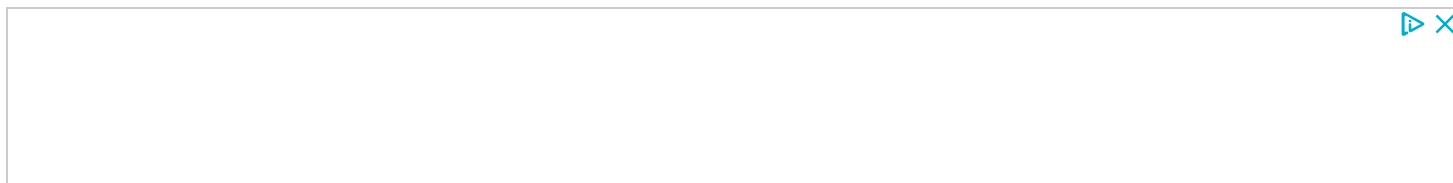
“I’m very confident that the mercury in vaccinations is a contributing factor,” said Burton, whose teenage grandson has autism. “It may not be the only one — that’s why I talked about environmental issues as well — but certainly anything that you inject into your body that has mercury in it is a contaminant.”

But while Burton requested the hearing and expects to preside over part of it, the testimony lined up by the Oversight panel is expected to take a wider look at the autism spectrum rather than zeroing in on the controversy over vaccines. In an invitation to the National Institutes of Health, Chairman Darrell Issa, R-Calif., said the hearing would look at “the federal response to the recent rise in ASD diagnoses,” the distribution of government resources, and research and treatment options.

“Rising ASD diagnosis rates present a challenge to federal agencies charged with coordinating response efforts,” Oversight spokesman Ali Ahmad said. “The committee will hear testimony from a broad array of voices, including parent advocates, self advocates, educational specialists and scientists.”

Burton's Role

Dozens of studies — including a 2004 report by the Institute of Medicine — have concluded that there is no relationship between vaccines and autism, but some concerns still linger. And for Burton, the issue is personal.



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Burton said his grandson received nine shots in one day, seven of which had mercury in them, shortly before he was diagnosed with autism. He believes a combination of things may have caused his grandson to become autistic, including the mercury in the vaccines and the fact that he got nine shots all together.

“If you get one shot and it has mercury in it, you get maybe a little bit of mercury in there that may not affect you neurologically. But it stays there, at least a part of it does,” Burton said, referring to brain tissue. “So when you have a number of shots, there’s an accumulation of it, and that’s when I think it can be real damaging.”

While government agencies have conducted studies on mercury in vaccinations, Burton thinks the evidence “has been somewhat biased and inconclusive.” He wants the Food and Drug Administration and the Health and Human Services Department to continue to do testing and research on the issue, and for Congress to be watchful as well.

He’s also the sponsor of legislation ([HR 3489](#)) that would require the president to set up a White House Conference on Autism to recommend policies that would help fight rising autism rates. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about one in every 88 children was identified as being on the autism spectrum in 2008, up from one in every 150 children in 2000. And he plans to continue to work on the issue after he retires from Congress.

“As long as I live, I’ll do everything I can to be helpful,” he said. “We need to make sure that we try to figure out how to solve this problem before it gets any worse.”

Thursday’s Hearing

Witnesses at Thursday’s hearing are likely to touch on the mercury issue — one group, SafeMinds, has a goal of eliminating mercury from all medical products — but the testimony is expected to cast a much wider net.

Mark Blaxill, who will be representing SafeMinds, said his remarks will focus on the idea that rising autism rates are a “national health crisis” and that federal agencies in charge of dealing with the disorder have failed to do so. Blaxill said he will also emphasize the costs associated with autism and ask Congress to hold federal agencies accountable and make changes to the 2006 law that governs federal autism research (PL 109-416).

Representatives of other autism-focused groups, including Autism Speaks and the Autism Society, are also confirmed witnesses. Scott Badesch, president and chief operating officer of the Autism Society, plans to discuss the needs of those affected by autism and advocate for increasing the focus on outcome-based services within government programs.

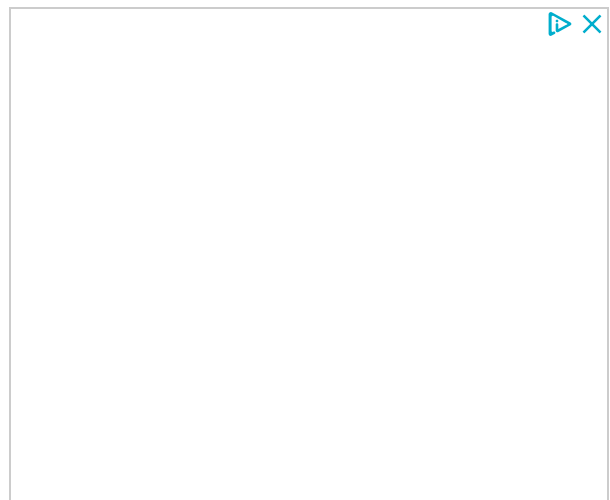
Speaking on behalf of federal agencies will be Alan Guttmacher, director of the NIH’s Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and Coleen Boyle, director of the CDC’s National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. Boyle is expected to discuss the rising prevalence of autism and the research her agency is doing on the issue.

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