

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

## Parents put faith in autism regimen

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LAFAYETTE, Calif. -- At 18 months, Jamison Handley began his heartbreaking plunge into autism.

The once-happy child who met all his developmental milestones began to spend his days spinning in circles, running along the wall and bending over a chair, staring vacantly.

He stopped making eye contact and responding to his name.

"We could have left the house and gone on a vacation to Hawaii and he would not have noticed," said his father, J.B. Handley, a managing partner for a San Francisco leveraged buyout firm.

"I cried six hours a day for a month. The reason we were devastated is because we believed what we were told about his prospects."

They learned autism has no known cause and no cure.

Yet today, J.B. and Lisa Handley say they have renewed hope, thanks to a controversial treatment known as chelation therapy, which strips the body of metals such as mercury.

Now not quite 3, Jamison began the treatment 7 months ago and has made dramatic progress, his parents say.

The couple has formed an international organization, dubbed Generation Rescue, to encourage other parents to consider the treatment, and set up a Web site to help others find doctors who believe in the treatment.

They have signed up 150 families from throughout the nation and 13 countries who swear by the procedure and want to assist others in beginning the process.

The Handleys maintain autism is caused by mercury poisoning in genetically susceptible children whose bodies have a weakened ability to protect themselves from heavy metals.

They officially launched their organization this week with a full-page ad in USA Today proclaiming that "Autism is preventable and reversible."

**Most medical experts** denounce such claims and argue that it gives parents false hope.

The influential Institute of Medicine last year rejected the idea of a link between autism and mercury-containing vaccines.

Other experts worry about side effects of an unproven treatment.

"The problem I see with a general promotion of chelation therapy for autism is there is no large, controlled study to determine whether it actually helps the kids," said Dr. Isaac Pessah, an autism researcher at the University of California-Davis M.I.N.D. Institute and director of the Center for Children's Environmental Health.

"The concern is that these chelation therapies change more than just the heavy metal balance in children. We don't know what the consequences might be."

Pessah said chelation may help some autistic children, but more study is needed.

**Chelation has been used** for decades to decontaminate people exposed to metals such as lead through their jobs or environmental factors. Chelating drugs bind with the metals, which are then excreted in the urine.

But the drugs also can remove beneficial minerals such as zinc, copper and iron, so people often also take mineral supplements.

The Handleys say Jamison has made steady improvement since he began the therapy.

"There's a light in his eyes now," his mother said. "He laughs. It had been five months since we had seen his smile."

The small signs of progress mean everything to his parents.

"He is a lot more affectionate and cuddly," Lisa Handley said. "He's seeking us out now."

**Dr. Lynne Mielke** of Developmental Spectrums in Pleasanton, Calif., began learning about chelation therapy when her son developed autism.

A psychiatrist by training, Mielke attended conferences sponsored by the group Defeat Autism Now, which promotes a biomedical approach. Its goal is to treat gastrointestinal problems through special diets, while attacking other medical issues through nutrition and chelation therapy. Mielke has been treating Jamison and others with the technique.

"Chelation is, in my opinion, the only treatment that is actually getting at the root cause of the disorder," she said. "The vast majority of children tolerate it very well and don't have any major problems."

She first sends blood, urine, stool and hair samples to specialized labs to test for the presence of metals.

Jamison's tests revealed high levels of mercury, arsenic, antimony, nickel, lead and tin.

"They're pouring out of his body as we detoxify," his father said.

Jamison receives a chelation drug known as DMPS, which has not received Food and Drug Administration approval. His parents rub the cream on his thighs and forearms every other day. The therapy typically lasts 18 to 24 months and costs \$2,000 to \$5,000.

Bi-monthly testing reveals what is happening with his mineral levels. His parents give him nearly 50 vitamins, minerals and other supplements, most of which he drinks with his juice.

Like many autistic children's parents, they also have Jamison on a special diet because of food allergies. He avoids dairy foods, gluten, soy, bananas, oranges, eggs and corn.

Mielke notes that a study last year revealed that some autistic children have a severe deficiency of glutathione, the body's most important tool for detoxifying and excreting heavy metals such as mercury and lead.

**There are many sources** of mercury for children and pregnant women, she adds, including fish and dental amalgams.

Many in the autism community point to vaccines, despite a lack of studies proving a connection. Until 1999, many childhood vaccines contained a mercury-based preservative known as thimerosal.

Then as a precautionary measure, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the U.S. Public Health Service urged drug makers to voluntarily remove thimerosal from children's vaccines. Today, most childhood vaccines contain only trace amounts of the preservative. The one exception is the flu shot, which is available with and without thimerosal.

**The skepticism of some** in the medical community doesn't bother Mielke.

"The medical profession, in my opinion, has their head buried in the sand when it comes to this condition. The wheels turn very slowly in traditional medicine."

She stopped short, however, of calling chelation therapy a cure. Many autistic children, including her own, have brain cell damage that will be irreversible, she said, although they can make some progress.

Dr. Anju Usman, a Chicago family practice physician, said she has seen marked improvement in many of the more than 2,000 autistic children she has given biomedical treatments including chelation.

Boyd Haley, a mercury researcher and chairman of the chemistry department at the University of Kentucky, urged the National Institutes of Health to do studies on the effectiveness of the treatment.

Some children appear to have recovered, he said.

The UC Davis M.I.N.D. institute, meanwhile, is studying the levels of mercury, lead, arsenic and other metals in autistic versus non-autistic children.

"The truth will come out over time," J.B. Handley said. "The best way it could come out is with thousands of recovered children. That's our dream."

**To learn more** Information on biomedical treatment of autistic children is available at [www.generationrescue.org](http://www.generationrescue.org)

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