

A Follow-up Thought about the Tylenol – Autism Controversy

Bill Menke, September 29, 2025

This essay follows up on a previous one of mine¹ on the subject of the autism-Tylenol controversy.

Early in his tenure as Director of Health and Human Services (HHS), Mr. Kennedy identified autism (technically, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD) as a focus of his Department's efforts. During his April 16, 2026 news conference, he said, "Autism destroys families but more importantly it destroys our greatest resource, which are our children ... we have to recognize we are doing this to our children and we need to put an end to it"². He went on to voice skepticism about for the medical community's conventional understanding of the disorder, announce an investigation into possible environmental causes and pledge to have some answers by September 2025.

In my opinion, his setting of a five-month deadline for progress was ill advised. Mr. Kennedy exhibited more than a little naiveté on the state of medical research on this disorder and rather too much hubris in thinking that he and a relatively small group of HHS consultants could rapidly *identify the cause of autism*.

An astonishing amount of scientific research has been done on autism. According to a study³ published in 2023, about 57,000 scientific papers containing the phrase "Autism Spectrum Disorder" in their titles were published between 2011 and 2022. Given that the research described in a scientific paper takes many months – if not years – to complete, and that that the typical paper has multiple authors, it is not an exaggeration to say that hundreds of thousands of person-years of research have been performed to date. Furthermore, the same study showed that the publication rate has accelerated significantly in the 2020s.

Among those 57,000 papers, and the many additional ones published before 2011 and after 2022, are studies that examine the possible causes of autism from a very wide set of perspectives – including environmental perspectives. A huge amount of science already has been done and yet no definitive cause yet has been identified. This is not to say that no further advances can be made, or that something important hasn't been missed. Scientific progress is all about defying the current worldview and seeing some connection that was hitherto fore overlooked or ignored. But the sheer volume of studies should give one pause. Mr. Kennedy is going up against what is demonstrably a very hard problem and not giving himself much time to make *real progress*.

The deadline resulted in President Trump, presumably on Mr. Kennedy's advice, announcing fake progress. It is clear from the most thorough studies (the Swedish⁴ and Japanese⁵ ones that I discussed previously) that Tylenol usage during pregnancy is not the major cause of autism. Furthermore, it is probably not a risk factor for developing the disorder at all (though for statistical reasons, it being a minor risk factor has yet to be rule out). Thus we are left with what I have previously called a sleight of hand. Mr. Kennedy's original agenda was to "put an end to" autism, but in the final analysis, all we have been given is the advice that if pregnant women tough it out and abstain from using Tylenol to control fever, they may have reduced the chance of autism in their child by an unknown – but certainly tiny – amount.

Giving this kind of advice is a disservice to everyone and especially to pregnant women.

¹www.ldeo.columbia.edu/~menke/www_users_menke/blogs/AutismTylenolControversy.pdf

²abcnews.go.com/Health/rfk-jr-lays-new-studies-autism-shuts-diagnoses/story?id=120882735

³Jiang, M, et al. (2023), pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37181872/

⁴jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2817406

⁵onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ppe.70071