

Trump Administration to promote sales of leucovorin for Autistic children

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Yesterday, Donald Trump spoke at a hate rally, stating that today they would be the "biggest announcement ... in the history of our country, ... I think we found an answer to autism... we're going to be talking about autism, how it happens, so we won't let it happen anymore, and how to get at least somewhat better when you have it."

Robert Kennedy Jr (aka RFK Jr), who has no training or education in any health topic, is set to announce that autism is caused by the use of Tylenol during pregnancy. What RFK Jr does have is a decades-long career profiting from anti-vaccine activism. For example, one of the sources of his personal income is that he collects "referral fees" for lawsuits against the pharmaceutical company Merck. Despite this being a conflict of interest with his current government position, he continues to take this income. He is not working as a lawyer for these cases, but the law firm gives him 10% of any money they make when RFK Jr refers a client to them.

What they are set to proclaim today is not only that autism is caused by prenatal Tylenol exposure, but also that autism can be "treated" by the pharmaceutical supplement leucovorin.

Leucovorin was previously also known by the brand name Wellcovorin (no longer available on the market) or may be referred to as citrovorum factor, folinic acid, or 5-formyl tetrahydrofolate. To be clear, this is different from folic acid, but it is a related form (a synthetic chemical reduced derivative) of folic acid.

Leucovorin is used to treat some (but not all) types of anemia, and is prescribed as a supportive medication when someone is receiving methotrexate as a chemotherapy or rheumatoid arthritis drug, or to treat methotrexate overdose. It is also often used as part of the chemotherapy suite of drugs for treating colon cancer or pancreatic cancer.

Leucovorin can have serious side effects, including diarrhea, rash, hives, itching, and difficulty breathing or swallowing. In children, it can increase irritability and fatigue, and children who have seizures can have increased numbers/frequency of seizures. It interacts poorly with some medications, and deaths have resulted from medication interactions. Because it can cause gastrointestinal problems, there are concerns that children with existing gastrointestinal problems may experience a worsening of their symptoms.

It's important to remember that if an Autistic person has a folic acid deficiency, this is a co-occurring medical condition, not autism. Autism is a developmental condition or difference of neurotype, not a medical diagnosis of vitamin or mineral deficiency. When an allistic (non-autistic) person has a vitamin deficiency, we do not attribute this to their lack of autism and claim that treating their nutritional needs is treating their allism spectrum disorder. It is only with autism that we move towards these rhetorical moves - and people do this because they have difficult emotions when confronted with the idea that disability and developmental differences are part of the natural genetic heritage of the human species. Ableism is a hell of a drug, and a hell of a grift.

So let's follow the money for this grift. Who stands to financially benefit from the US government claiming that autism is treated by the pharmaceutical supplement leucovorin?

Mehmet Oz, aka "Dr Oz," is a television personality whom Trump appointed to head the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. He also owns a supplement company called iHerb. While he claimed he would divest from iHerb if confirmed, he continues to have complex financial connections to the company.

iHerb currently sells at least 4 types of folinic acid supplements, of which it already sells thousands of units a month.

Now the most recent, largest study of folinic acid for Autistic children found that any benefits were too small to be clinically meaningful and were primarily seen in children who, in addition to autism, had a co-occurring issue of high titers of folate receptor autoantibodies. This was a placebo-controlled study, and children in both groups showed "improvements." Note that in studies like this, which focus on children aged 2-10, "improvements" usually just mean "the children grew up, and learned new skills as they grew."

Now keep in mind: a study of 2,500,000 children found a small *association* between prenatal Tylenol use and autism diagnosis (a hazard ratio of 1.05, which is basically nothing), and even this association entirely disappeared when they introduced sibling controls.

Please be aware of how this political grifting is functioning as a marketing campaign for a pharmaceutical product, and how caregivers and professionals may be easily duped into a sale and subsequent dosing of Autistic children.

Caregivers who are concerned their child may have a nutritional deficiency that requires prescribed supplementation should take their child to their primary care physician for evaluation. A blood test can tell you if a child is deficient in vitamins and minerals. Further, caregivers who are concerned that their child may have nutritional deficiencies can be encouraged to work with a registered dietitian who can help the family both accommodate an Autistic person's sensory needs around food while ensuring the family is getting the nutrients needed within the family's budget and resources. If a family has trouble finding a registered dietitian who is knowledgeable about autism, one option is to put together a team of an occupational therapist and a dietitian - OTs familiar with autism can help the RD understand sensory processing differences.

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