

US court rejects connection between vaccine and autism

The US Federal Court Claims in Washington has denied damages to three families who alleged that childhood vaccines caused their children's autism.

Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Fred Charatan reports that the decision was made on the 12 February and covers sentinel cases affecting a portion of the more than 5500 claims that have been filed by families seeking payment through the \$2.5 billion Federal Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme.

Each of the three cases was decided by a judge known as a special master. One of them, George Hastings said in the ruling, "The numerous medical studies concerning these issues, performed by medical scientists worldwide, have come down strongly against the petitioners' contentions."

He also wrote, "Considering all of the evidence, I found that the petitioners have failed to demonstrate that thimerosal containing vaccines can contribute to causing immune dysfunction, or that the MMR [measles, mumps, and rubella] vaccine can contribute to causing either autism or gastrointestinal dysfunction."

The evidence for connecting autism with vaccination "is weak, contradictory, and unpersuasive," concludes special master Denise Vowell: "Sadly, the petitioners in this litigation have been the victims of bad science conducted to support litigation rather than to advance medical and scientific understanding."

In arriving at their decision, the three judges considered 5000 pages of testimony from experts and 930 medical articles. The author of one of the rulings said he had deep sympathy for the parents but said they were misled by doctors guilty of gross medical misjudgment.

The Department of Health and Human Services hopes that this ruling will help to persuade parents that vaccines are safe and do not cause autism. Public health specialists believe that fears over vaccines have contributed to a 12-year high in measles cases in the US and a recent outbreak of bacterial meningitis.

A recent report has shown that high rates of measles have contributed to measles outbreaks in developing world countries, where the disease can be fatal.