

AUTISM GOES TO VACCINE COURT

BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ

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While his younger sister attended camp this summer, Daniel Saffran stayed home in Huntington Station with his mother. His sister can play and socialize with other children, but he can't. At 7, he lives in an autistic world.

One day last month, Daniel was able T-shirt with "Beautiful Daniel" painted across the chest, but he cannot read those words. As a child with autism, Daniel often cues from an audio interface machine to get dressed. And his mother Rita Jones-Saffran says if David goes three days without his t-shirt, he loses handwriting skills like toilet training.

As a baby, Daniel waved and played peek-a-boo. Developing normally, his mother said, he began to speak at age 1. Then his health declined, she said, after routine vaccinations when he was 18 months old. Daniel ran a high fever and became lethargic. He stopped responding to his name.

When a specialist diagnosed him with autism, his mother pointed out that he had just the most likely culprit—a cold. The Cecilio family learned that Michelle's immune system was unable to clear the measles virus from her after her vaccinations, said Dr. Marcel Klimbushorne, a child neurologist who testified as an expert witness to the family recording the court. "I just feel like it's not healthy," Jones-Saffran said. "I think it would have been healthy."

The Saffran family is among 4,800 others nationwide whose disabilities they believe were caused by vaccines, something the scientific community has largely rejected. But these families are seeking an answer to the mystery of their children's afflictions. "They have no idea what's causing it," said Rita, 36, of Steinkirk, who said she wants answers for her son, Alexander (Alex), 11 months, and her daughter, Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan) introduced a bill that would require the National Institutes of Health to conduct a study comparing vaccinated and unvaccinated populations in an attempt to determine whether a link exists between vaccination and autism.

The court is expected to hear

containing vaccines.

three tests and then make a ruling on those if they fit with the framework for compensation to the others.

Vaccine preservative blamed

Using Michelle's story, the petitioners sketched out their theory that thimerosal, a mercury-containing preservative once injected into many vaccines and contained in some childhood immunizations, is really to blame. Autism symptoms begin to show up around 18 to 24 months, the age they are typically vaccinated.

The purpose of the court, established in 1986 by the National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act, is to decide whether vaccine preservatives and autism are linked. A panel of three judges will rule in several cases, including these two, on whether the autism is a result of the thimerosal in the vaccines. The court will then rule on whether the thimerosal in the vaccines containing thimerosal caused the autism in the second case, the petitioners blame the measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations, said Dr. Marcel Klimbushorne, a child neurologist who testified as an expert witness to the family recording the court. "I just feel like it's not healthy," Jones-Saffran said. "I think it would have been healthy."

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What is autism?

Approximately one in 150 children has an autism spectrum disorder. These developmental disabilities impair communication and social interaction, and are manifested in repetitive behaviors. Autism is four times as likely in boys than girls and is routinely diagnosed between the ages of 3 and 5.

What causes autism?

Scientists have been unable to determine causes, but many point to genes and environment. The parents of a child with autism have a 2 percent to a 1 percent chance of having a second autistic child. Some believe thimerosal, mercury-sulfite and mercury-cyanide found in many vaccines, is linked to autism. Mainstream studies have not found enough evidence to make this connection.

What are the symptoms?

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There is a non-medical test for autism. Diagnosis is determined by behavior. Parents often notice several types of behavioral symptoms before a child's first birthday. It is not known to affect life expectancy.

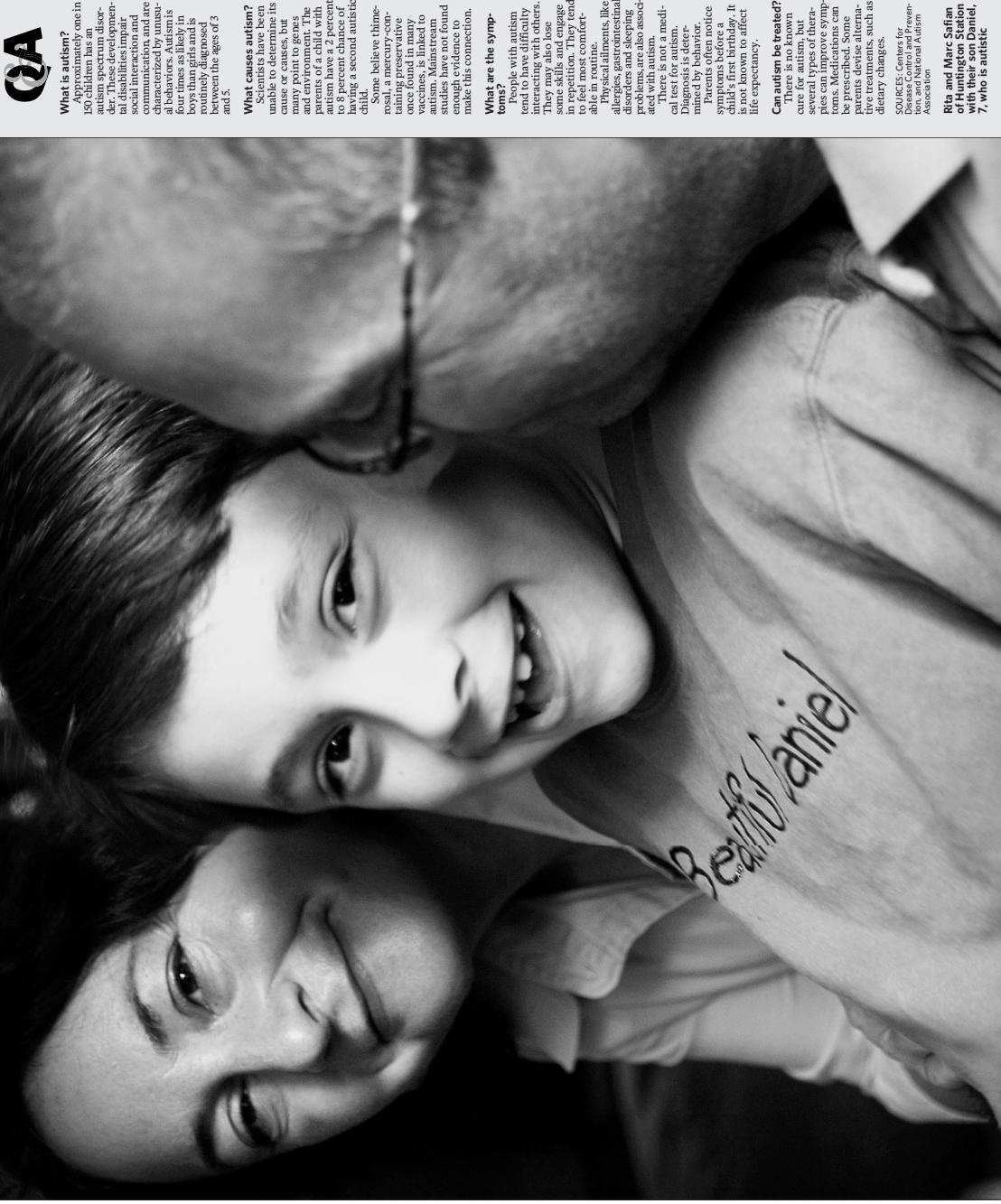
Can autism be treated?

There are no known cures for autism, but several types of treatments can improve symptoms. Medications can be prescribed. Some parents devise alternative treatments, such as dietary changes.

SOURCES: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Autism Society of America

Rita and Marc Saffran of Huntington Station with their son Daniel, 7, who is autistic

Families seek compensation from federal trust fund, saying vaccines made their children autistic



NEWSDAY PHOTO/ALISON VELLA

The making of “Autism goes to vaccine court” by Christina Hernandez

It was my editor's idea to localize the heated "autism court" proceedings that were going on in Washington last summer. We found a Long Island family to which we could anchor the story, and I set out to understand the confusing world of vaccine court, to navigate the science of autism and to immerse myself in the emotional rollercoaster that parents of children with autism live. I had to walk a fine line between the parent's passionate viewpoints and science's skepticism, and I hope the story succeeded in describing this complex world.

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