

Nobel laureate joins anti-vaccination crowd at Autism One



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Healthcare

If you're reading this from anywhere but [Chicago](#), you just missed the Autism One conference, which ends today. [This conference](#) run by Jenny McCarthy and Generation Rescue purports to tell parents "the truth" about autism.

The AutismOne anti-science digest

The conference is a veritable festival of unproven claims, offering a powerful but false message of hope to parents who are desperately searching for new treatments for their children. It's also a nexus for anti-vaccinationists, who run special seminar educating parents about how to get vaccine exemptions so that they can enroll their unvaccinated children in public schools.

A look at the presentations reveals that rather than presenting "the truth," one speaker after another is making unsupported, unscientific claims and then offering their own special therapy. The one thing that most of these presentations have in common is that the speaker is making money from selling their so-called treatments. For example, Anat Baniel offers her self-named "Anat Baniel method" and is promoting it through ads in the conference program. Other speakers are offering special diets, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, and in perhaps the most damaging treatment, Mark and David Geier's [chemical castration](#) therapy. [Mark Blaxill](#) is there, still pushing the thoroughly disproven link between mercury and autism, and hawking his book on the topic.

The other major theme of the conference is conspiracies: how the government, big

pharma, and the scientific establishment are all conspiring to hide "the truth" about autism, which the speaker will reveal to the audience. Coincidentally, many of the speakers also offer treatments, for a fee.

This year's speakers include Jenny McCarthy and Andrew Wakefield, as usual, but also a new entry: Luc Montagnier.

[Jenny McCarthy](#) has been a leader of the anti-vaccine movement for over a decade. She's a former Playboy playmate and MTV host, with no medical qualifications whatsoever, who is convinced that vaccines caused her son's autism. She's been spreading her anti-vaccine message very effectively, with particular help from [Oprah Winfrey](#) and Larry King, who gave her prime television exposure countless times. Oprah even offered McCarthy her own show, until [McCarthy ditched Oprah](#) for NBC.

Andrew Wakefield, the thoroughly discredited doctor who [falsified data in order to push his false hypothesis](#) that autism is caused by the MMR vaccine - whose medical license was revoked in the UK, and whose famous 1998 paper on autism and vaccines was retracted after it was shown to be fraudulent - claims that [his talk](#) "offers solutions [that] will be ignored by those in power and the more dire of its predictions will result." Too bad I missed that one.

Oprah and Jenny talk science

It's no surprise that Jenny McCarthy and Andrew Wakefield, leaders of the anti-vaccine movement, are speaking at AutismOne. Much more surprising is the presence of Nobel laureate Luc Montagnier, co-discoverer of the link between the HIV virus and AIDS. What is he doing at this festival of pseudoscience?

Well, apparently Montagnier has [gone off the deep end](#) into pseudoscience himself. He claims that his new group, Chronimed, has discovered in autistic children

“ "DNA sequences that emit, in certain conditions, electromagnetic waves. The analysis by molecular biology techniques allows us to identify these electromagnetic waves as coming from ... bacterial species."

What the heck? In what seems to be a desperate effort to stay relevant, Montagnier is promoting wild theories with little scientific basis, and now he is taking advantage of vulnerable parents (see [his appeal here](#)) to push a therapy of long-term antibiotic treatment for autistic children.

This is truly a wacky theory. Montagnier hasn't been able to publish this in a proper journal, for a very good reason: it's nonsense. He claims that quantum field theory - an area of physics in which he has no qualifications - explains how electromagnetic waves emanating from DNA can explain not only autism, but also Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, Lyme disease, and rheumatoid arthritis. Montagnier makes these claims and more in a self-published paper that he [posted on arXiv](#).

This isn't Montagnier's first crazy idea: just a year ago, he claimed that [DNA molecules can teleport](#) between test tubes, also based on some kind of quantum hocus pocus. This [crackpot claim](#) should have been ignored, and it would have been if not for the fact that Montagnier is a Nobel laureate. He's also [endorsed homeopathy](#), another [quack treatment](#).

This is a sad coda to a brilliant medical career. Not only is Montagnier espousing junk science and tarnishing his own reputation, but he is lending credibility to the AutismOne conference, which is a festival of hucksters and snake-oil salesman, offering unproven, ineffective, and even harmful treatments to vulnerable children and their parents.

Autism is a complex, difficult condition. Thousands of researchers are pouring their hearts and souls into understanding the disease and developing new treatments. AutismOne does a terrible disservice to autistic children by siphoning away time, energy, and money that could instead go into real science. We can only hope that it will fade away.



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