



HEALTH AFFAIRS

## THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

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MEMORANDUM FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ARMY (M&RA)  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE NAVY (M&RA)  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE (M&RA)  
DIRECTOR, JOINT STAFF

SUBJECT: Department of Defense Guidance Regarding Thimerosal Containing Vaccines

Several states have enacted legislation limiting or forbidding the administration of vaccines containing the preservative thimerosal for select groups, including younger children and pregnant women. This is based on the concern that thimerosal contains small amounts of mercury and may result in toxicity. This potential risk has been investigated extensively and found to be without scientific merit. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reaffirms that there is no convincing scientific evidence of harm caused by low doses of thimerosal in vaccines ([www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/thimerosal.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/thimerosal.htm)). A number of professional organizations, including the American Academy of Preventive Medicine and the Infectious Diseases Society of America have opposed restricting access to vaccines containing thimerosal due to the potential perpetuation of false and misleading information that vaccines are not safe.

Today, except for some influenza vaccines, vaccines that contain thimerosal are not used routinely in the United States to protect preschool children. Of the influenza vaccines, the live attenuated vaccine is thimerosal-free, and a number of manufacturers of inactivated vaccines produce thimerosal-free influenza vaccines. Some vaccines provided to Active Duty Service members, including pregnant women, may contain thimerosal. In addition, during periods of vaccine shortages or public health emergencies, the availability of thimerosal-free vaccines may be limited.

In an effort to comply with local requirements, facilities providing immunization services should make every attempt to comply with state law related to vaccines preserved with thimerosal. Thimerosal-free vaccine allocation should be based on local requirements, and subsequent projections for seasonal influenza and other vaccine requirements should be consistent with these local requirements.

If thimerosal-free vaccines are not available in local communities that require them, do not withhold immunization, but obtain patients consent for immunization. In these instances, provide the patient information regarding the local statute, as well as the scientific evidence indicating that vaccines containing thimerosal are safe, and inform them of the potential risk of not receiving the vaccine. To the extent that any provision of

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state law conflicts with this policy, this memorandum provides the overriding Federal interest of protecting Department of Defense (DoD) health care beneficiaries from vaccine-preventable diseases and establishes the DoD standard of care for effective immunizations.

Protection of the beneficiary population by effective immunization programs is an essential component of health promotion. Make every attempt to ensure protection of our beneficiary population.



S. Ward Casscells, MD

cc:

Surgeon General of the Army  
Surgeon General of the Navy  
Surgeon General of the Air Force  
Director of Health and Safety  
U. S. Coast Guard