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governance, ethics, evidence, policy, practice

Expressions of Concern Series

Failures of Imagination, Intellect, Integrity

A continuing series responding to actions by governments, UN system agencies, multilateral organizations, NGOs, civil society, commercial organizations

Center for Vaccine Ethics & Policy

Expression of Concern

US HHS Demands Changes to Gavi's Vaccines Portfolio to Resume U.S. Funding

11 February 2026

[Updated 18 Feb 2026]

Context

- **Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance** is “a public-private partnership that helps vaccinate more than half the world’s children against some of the world’s deadliest diseases. The Vaccine Alliance brings together developing country and donor governments, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, the vaccine industry, technical agencies, civil society, the Gates Foundation and other private sector partners.
“Since its inception in 2000, Gavi has helped to immunise a whole generation – over 1.2 billion children – and prevented more than 20.6 million future deaths, helping to halve child mortality in 78 lower-income countries. Gavi also plays a key role in improving global health security by supporting health systems as well as funding global stockpiles for Ebola, cholera, meningococcal and yellow fever vaccines. After two decades of progress, Gavi is now focused on protecting the next generation, above all the zero-dose children who have not received even a single vaccine shot...”
- **In the last few years, the USG has provided approximately USD\$300 million to Gavi annually, roughly 13% of its budget.** In 2024, the Biden administration pledged \$1.6 billion to the organization over the 5 years.
- **HHS Secretary Kennedy**, in his videotaped message to the Gavi pledging conference in June 2025, **communicated that given the U.S. assessment of Gavi’s treatment of purported safety issues with regard to Gavi’s vaccine portfolio, further U.S. funding – Including support commitments of USD\$300 million already made – would not proceed.**
- Challenging the integrity of Gavi governance, and making assertions around Gavi’s treatment of vaccine safety – extensively referencing DPT vaccine – the HHS Secretary noted “...I will tell you how to take vaccine safety seriously...Consider the best science available, even when the science contradicts established paradigms...until that happens the United States won’t contribute more to Gavi...”
- On January 28, 2026, *Reuters* reported that HHS had communicated “**Until a plan for removal of thimerosal-containing vaccines is developed and the plan initiated, the United States will withhold future new funding.**” *Reuters* further reported that “The [HHS] official would not comment on when the request was made, but claimed Gavi has so far refused to develop such a plan.” [*Appendix B*]
- We have not identified any posted HHS comment or announcement related to this demand.
- On January 29, 2026, *Health Policy Watch* reported that a Gavi spokesperson said “**We received a**

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request from the US government to remove thimerosal from our portfolio. We remain in contact on this subject...While we very much hope to find a pathway to welcoming the US back as a donor, **any decision related to Gavi's portfolio would require a decision by Gavi's Board and input from preceding governance committees, which will be guided by scientific consensus."** [*Appendix B*]

- We have not identified any posted Gavi comment or announcement related to this statement.
- Gavi's next scheduled Board meeting is March 25-26, 2026 (Board Retreat).
- **Scientific consensus around the safety dimensions of thimerosal and vaccines is clear.** While WHO guidance and positions on this matter have been issued over the last 20 years, the most recent analysis is **Vaccines, Thimerosal and Autism Spectrum Disorder, evidence review 2010-2025** [12 December 2025 | Technical document | 54 pages] [*see also Appendix A*]. In its conclusion, this evidence review notes **"...The overwhelming weight of the evidence continues to strongly affirm the safety of current vaccines, showing no causal link with ASD or other NDDs."** [*ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder; NDD / NDDs: Neurodevelopmental Disorder(s)*]

GE2P2 Global: Key Observations/Concerns

- **GE2P2 Global holds that provision of financial support to INGOs** [International Non-Governmental Organizations] in the global health space such as Gavi **is properly at the sole election of the funder** – whether a nation-state, a public foundation, a commercial entity, or a private individual.
- **We recognize that funders may condition their commitment to such financial support** on governance, programmatic actions, or dimensions of performance that the funder stipulates are "required".
- Equally, we recognize that INGOs – especially Gavi – operate under governance structures responsible for oversight of their mission, programs, performance and effectiveness. As such, **Gavi's Board and leadership are charged with considering, and accepting or declining to accept, any donor condition which might be presented.**
- **When a donor's demand for specific action as a condition of support is not grounded in evidence derived from rigorous science** – or is not amenable to scientific examination – **the organization's governance mechanism has, in our view, a clear responsibility to decline the donor's demand.**
- **When a funder's demand for specific action is based on distortion, misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the relevant science,** that demand should be vigorously challenged by the relevant community of practice and by the INGO itself.
- **When a funder's demand is driven by ideology – whether overtly articulated or opaque – that demand is irresponsible** and should be vigorously challenged by the relevant community of practice and by the INGO itself.
- **When a funder seeks to leverage the scale of its past or future support to secure its demand** – especially where that support is or has been material or even existential to the INGO – **that behavior is irresponsible** and should be vigorously challenged by the relevant community of practice and by the INGO itself.
- **GE2P2 assesses that accommodating irresponsible funder demands and behaviors such as those referenced above sets the stage for further funder demands that compromise mission, governance, programs, staff and beneficiaries.**

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GE2P2 Global: Action Requests

US Government/HHS

- For transparency, HHS should immediately post the precise demands it has made of Gavi as a condition for consideration of further USG support.
- Insofar as these HHS demands involve openly and clearly flawed evidence and underlying science, this demands should be formally withdrawn.
- HHS should immediately complete payment of the already-committed and appropriated funds from earlier USG commitment [USD\$300 million] to Gavi.

Gavi

- For transparency, Gavi should immediately post the precise demands made by HHS around actions required as a condition for consideration of further USG support.
- Gavi should immediately post a complete statement of its position with regard to these HHS demands, extending as appropriate comments reported in the media.
- Gavi's Board should use its earliest opportunity to formally and publicly respond to the HHS demands.

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[Appendix A – WHO: Analysis-Evidence Review on Vaccines and Thimerosal; FDA Treatment](#)

[Appendix B – Media Reporting and Analysis of HHS-Gavi Funding](#)

[Other GE2P2 Global Foundation Expressions of Concern](#)

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Appendix A – WHO: Analysis-Evidence Review on Vaccines and Thimerosal; FDA Treatment

Vaccines, Thimerosal and Autism Spectrum Disorder, evidence review 2010-2025

12 December 2025 | Technical document | 54 pages

Download (1.1 MB)

Overview

The Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS) reviewed the evidence regarding a potential link between vaccines and autism multiple times between 2002 and 2012, consistently concluding that the evidence does not support a causal relationship. To provide an updated and comprehensive overview of the published scientific literature on this topic, the World Health Organization (WHO) commissioned a review of studies from 2010 to 2025.

Executive Summary [p.7]

...Background

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a diverse group of neurodevelopmental conditions characterized by varying degrees of difficulty with social interaction and communication, with onset typically occurring in early childhood. Scientific evidence suggests that multiple factors, including both genetic and environmental influences, contribute to the development of ASD.

Concerns about a potential link between vaccines and ASD gained significant attention in the late 1990s, following the publication of a fraudulent study that proposed connections between natural or vaccine-derived measles virus, inflammatory bowel disease, and ASD—particularly in relation to the measles–mumps–rubella (MMR) vaccine (Wakefield et al., 1998; see retraction notice, Editors of the Lancet, 2010). Additionally, vaccines that contain the organomercury preservative thiomersal have gained focused attention as an exposure pathway for mercury that could contribute to the development of ASD and neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) more broadly.

Concerns about thiomersal-containing vaccines and MMR vaccines (which do not contain a preservative) have persisted over time, despite no strong evidence to support a causal relationship.

The Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety has reviewed the evidence regarding a potential link between vaccines and autism multiple times between 2002 and 2012, consistently concluding that the evidence does not support a causal relationship. This updated review was commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide a comprehensive overview of the published scientific literature on these topics since 2010.

Objectives

To complete a systematic review that answers the following research questions. based on literature that has been published from 2010 to August 2025:

- :: What is the relationship between thiomersal-containing vaccines, and ASD?
- :: More broadly, what is the relationship between vaccines and ASD?

As a secondary objective, we explored the relationship between vaccines and broader NDDs by including and analyzing studies returned by the search strategy that specified NDD [Neurodevelopmental Disorder(s)] outcomes (regardless if ASD was also included)...

Conclusion [p.10]

The findings for each of the research questions are relatively consistent, underscoring that the most methodologically rigorous primary research studies do not support a causal association between vaccines, thiomersal-containing or otherwise, and ASD. Nine studies from a single author group did report an association with thiomersal-containing vaccines and ASD and/or other NDDs, and two studies

from different author groups reported an association between MMR and ASD, however they all had very low SOE and high RoB. Moreover, none of the meta-analyses included in this review supported a causal association. These findings are also consistent with the previous review conducted by WHO, as well as several other reviews that have been updated since 2012. The overwhelming weight of the evidence continues to strongly affirm the safety of current vaccines, showing no causal link with ASD or other NDDs.

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[FDA – Thimerosal and Vaccines](#) [accessed 10 Feb 2026]

Key Points

- All vaccines routinely recommended for children 6 years of age and younger in the U.S. are available in formulations that do not contain thimerosal.
- Vaccines that do not contain thimerosal as a preservative are also available for adolescents and adults.
- **A robust body of peer-reviewed scientific studies conducted in the U.S. and other countries support the safety of thimerosal-containing vaccines.**
- Preservatives prevent microbial growth.
- The use of thimerosal as a preservative in vaccines has markedly declined due to reformulation and development of vaccines supplied in single-use presentations.

Thimerosal as a Preservative

Thimerosal is a mercury-containing organic compound (an organomercurial). Since the 1930s, it has been widely used as a preservative in a number of biological and drug products, including many vaccines, to prevent the growth of harmful microbes inadvertently introduced into the vaccine during use. The documented antimicrobial properties of thimerosal contribute to the safe use of vaccines in multi-dose vials, and the ability to package certain vaccines, such as those for seasonal and pandemic influenza, in multi-dose vials helps facilitate immunization campaigns in the United States and globally that save lives. However, the use of thimerosal as a preservative in U.S. FDA-licensed vaccines has significantly declined due to reformulation and development of vaccines presented in single-dose containers...

Appendix B – Media Reporting and Analysis of HHS-Gavi Funding

Exclusive: US conditions funding to global vaccine group on dropping mercury-based preservative from shots

By Jennifer Rigby

Reuters, January 28, 2026 10:25 AM EST Updated January 28, 2026

Summary

- :: US official says Gavi has so far refused to outline a plan for removing thimerosal
- :: Gavi says decision would need approval from its board, committees and scientific consensus
- :: Studies have found no harm from thimerosal, a preservative used in multi-dose vials
- :: US Health Secretary has claimed thimerosal linked to autism

LONDON, Jan 28 (Reuters) - The Trump administration has told global vaccine group Gavi to phase out shots containing the preservative thimerosal as a condition of providing the group with funding, a U.S. official and a Gavi spokesperson told Reuters.

The request, which Reuters is the first to report, is the latest sign of efforts by the administration of President Donald Trump to influence health policy globally...

"Until a plan for removal of thimerosal-containing vaccines is developed and the plan initiated, the United States will withhold future new funding," an official for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services told Reuters...

The official would not comment on when the request was made, but claimed Gavi has so far refused to develop such a plan. A Gavi spokesperson confirmed the request to remove thimerosal from its portfolio, and said the group remained in contact with the U.S. government on the subject.

"While we very much hope to find a pathway to welcoming the U.S. back as a donor, any decision related to Gavi's portfolio would require a decision by Gavi's board and input from preceding governance committees, which will be guided by scientific consensus," the spokesperson said...

US pressures Gavi to phase out use of thimerosal-containing vaccines

Chris Dall, MA

CIDRAP, January 28, 2026

The Trump administration is asking Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance to phase out the use of vaccines containing the preservative thimerosal if it wants future US funding.

Thimerosal is a mercury-containing preservative that's been used in small amounts in some multidose vaccine vials since the 1930s to prevent microbial contamination. Although the preservative is no longer used in any routinely used US vaccines, it is used in some multidose vaccines in other countries.

US Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and many vaccine critics have long claimed that thimerosal is linked to developmental delays and neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism. Although those claims are not backed by evidence, in June 2025, a federal vaccine advisory board remade by Kennedy recommended that Americans receive only seasonal flu shots in thimerosal-free, single-dose formulations. (Multidose flu shots account for only a fraction of the US vaccine supply).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has concluded that the small amount of thimerosal, which contains ethyl mercury, in multidose vaccines does not cause harm.

The request, first reported by Reuters, suggests that US support for Gavi, a public-private partnership that helps provide and distribute vaccines to lower-income countries, may be contingent on the organization aligning itself more closely to Kennedy's views on vaccines.

An HHS spokesperson said the United States has asked Gavi to submit a detailed action plan with a timeline for a phase-out of thimerosal-containing vaccines in its portfolio, a move they said would bring the poorest countries in line with US, Canadian, and European standards. But Gavi has not yet done so.

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"Until a plan for removal of thimerosal-containing vaccines is developed and the plan initiated, the United States will withhold future new funding and pause access to the DFC [US International Development Finance Corporation] line of financing," the spokesperson said...

US Freezes All Funds to Gavi Over Vaccine Preservative Thimerosal

Health Policy Watch – Medicines & Vaccines

29/01/2026 Kerry Cullinan

The US government has frozen funds to Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, until it commits to a plan to phase out the preservative thimerosal from all the vaccines it distributes.

The US demand, first reported by Reuters, is linked to the unproven belief held by US Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr and allies that thimerosal, which contains mercury, is linked to autism.

However, even the US Food and Drug Administration has pronounced that "thimerosal has been the subject of numerous studies and has a long record of safe and effective use preventing bacterial and fungal contamination of vaccines, with no ill effects established other than minor local reactions at the site of injection." ...

Scientific consensus

"We received a request from the US government to remove thimerosal from our portfolio. We remain in contact on this subject," a Gavi spokesperson told Health Policy Watch.

"While we very much hope to find a pathway to welcoming the US back as a donor, any decision related to Gavi's portfolio would require a decision by Gavi's Board and input from preceding governance committees, which will be guided by scientific consensus."

Hanging in the balance is some \$300 million already allocated by the Biden administration but not yet paid, as well as any new funds.

U.S. ultimatum to vaccine group: No more funds unless you stop using thimerosal

NPR – National Public Radio – Global Health

January 30, 2026 3:45 PM ET

By Gabrielle Emanuel

The U.S. government has given an ultimatum to the international group that helps provide vaccines to children in the world's poorest countries.

In a statement sent to NPR, The Department of Health and Human Services said that Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance must remove the ingredient thimerosal from its vaccines — or else the U.S. will "withhold future new funding." The news was first reported by Reuters on Wednesday.

At the heart of the U.S. demand is an unsubstantiated theory that the mercury in thimerosal could be linked to autism. Thimerosal is a chemical compound that is added to vaccines as a preservative.

This is the latest development in the changing relationship between Gavi — which says it has provided vaccines for 1.1 billion children in lower-resource countries and prevented 18 million deaths — and the United States, once a major funder of the vaccine group.

In June, the Trump administration cut off more than a billion dollars previously promised to the group. At that time, HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said that Gavi "ignores the science" when it comes to vaccine safety...

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The Foundation has a strong record of responding to public comment and public consultation opportunities globally to strengthen and refine the development of laws, regulations, standards, policies, and guidance, and in support of other deliberative processes involving scientific rigor, research ethics and integrity. These calls are issued from organizations in the United Nations system, multilateral agencies, governments and country regulatory bodies, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions, professional societies, and commercial organizations.

This Expression of Concern is one of a series where the Foundation takes note of and urges mitigating responses to actions taken by organizations as listed above which we assess to challenge, compromise or confound scientific rigour, ethics, or integrity.

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