With 700,000 cases in Britain alone, we MUST find the real reason so many people have autism - like my son David: CHRIS STEVENS

dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14401477/cases-Britain-autism-son-David-CHRIS-STEVENS.html

February 16, 2025

When Elaine C. was seven years old, her parents became so worried about her speech that they approached a psychiatrist.

The little girl could talk. She just couldn't say anything meaningful. Instead of asking questions or chattering to her parents, Elaine simply repeated bizarre phrases: 'Dinosaurs don't cry... Needle head... Seals and salamanders.'

The psychiatrist who studied Elaine, Dr Leo Kanner, was born in Austria but lived on America's east coast. After three weeks of observations, he informed her parents that their daughter was suffering from an extremely rare condition – so rare that in five years of intensive research, from New York to Boston, he had been able to discover only ten other cases.

Dr Kanner coined a word for this condition: he called it autism.

That was the mid-1940s. Today, a psychiatrist could go into virtually any school in Britain or the US and find at least ten children with autism. Some would have learning difficulties as profound as Elaine's or more debilitating. Others could show a variety of less obvious

developmental delays.

About 700,000 people in the UK have autism, according to the British Medical Association. It is frequently portrayed on TV, in shows such as Channel 4's police drama Patience last month or the ITV crime serial Unforgotten. In those shows, the actors playing autistic characters – Ella Maisy Purvis and Maximilian Fairley – are themselves autistic.

Yet in 1998, when my wife Nicky and I approached our GP in Bristol with concerns about our 21-month-old son, he told us autism was out of the question. 'No child in this practice is autistic,' he said.

That GP was very wrong, not only about our son David, but about many hundreds, at the very least, of other children in that catchment area whose autism was yet to be diagnosed.

Christopher Stevens with his son David in 2004 who suffers from autism

How is this possible, that less than a century ago autism was unknown? And a generation ago, GPs were unaware of it? Yet now, nearly every parent knows of families with autistic children, even if their own kids don't have it.

Earlier this month, US President Donald Trump weighed in on social media, commenting in his typical megaphone fashion: '20 years ago, Autism in children was 1 in 10,000. NOW IT'S 1 in 34. WOW! Something's really wrong.'

Many who disagree on principle with everything Trump says will argue with his figures. In fact, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about one in 36 American children now have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a four-fold

rise since 2000.

Others will dismiss the statistical increase as irrelevant. They'll say the rise is all due to better diagnosis, better screening, increased awareness among doctors and teachers and changes to the definition of what ASD actually is.

Psychiatrists now talk about the 'autistic spectrum', with the most profoundly disabled at one end and those who are 'high functioning' at the other.

When my son was young, plenty of people – other parents, social workers and medical professionals – seemed to take personal issue with David's diagnosis. For all sorts of reasons, they didn't want to believe it.

The simplest retort, I discovered, was to let them spend a couple of minutes with him.

My son was a screamer. He could hit a note of ear-piercing intensity and hold it indefinitely, barely breaking for breath – and no amount of pleading, cuddling or bribing could stop him.

Members of the public have threatened me with violence if I failed to make him stop – or even threatened to hit David. Complete strangers, hearing one of his meltdowns, have banged on our front door and tried to intervene. On one occasion, we were ordered out of the waiting room at Bristol Children's Hospital and told that, if we wanted to see a doctor, we'd have to wait in the car park because David's screaming was so unbearably intense.

Autistic actress Ella Maisy Purvis in TV drama Patience

No one who ever heard that sound could ignore it. They knew something was terribly wrong with my child, something that was not explained by 'better diagnosis', 'increased awareness' or 'broader definitions'.

Children like David were unusual in the 1990s, and tragically they are not nearly as unusual now. But what should really alarm us is that they were all but non-existent before the 1940s.

Dr Kanner's studies are not the only evidence. In the UK, the first cases began to be noticed in the 1950s, when they were classified under 'childhood schizophrenia'. The first British doctor to use the term 'autism' was Mildred Creak, a psychiatrist at Great Ormond Street hospital, in 1963.

In other words, autism was unknown in Britain before the Beatles era.

If you're still unconvinced that the condition has appeared and become widespread in the space of a human lifetime, think about this: in all of 19th-century literature, not a single child is described with autistic traits.

Charles Dickens had ten children. Leo Tolstoy had 13. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who wrote dozens of sensation novels, had six of her own and five stepchildren. Those writers, like countless others of the time, were fascinated by psychological strangeness. But none of them depicted autism in their books – which can only mean they never saw it.

When Trump sounded the alarm last week, he had an agenda. 'We need BOBBY!!!' he wrote, referring to Robert Kennedy Jr, who was last week sworn in as the US health secretary.

Kennedy is a conspiracy theorist who has linked the epidemic of autism to vaccines.

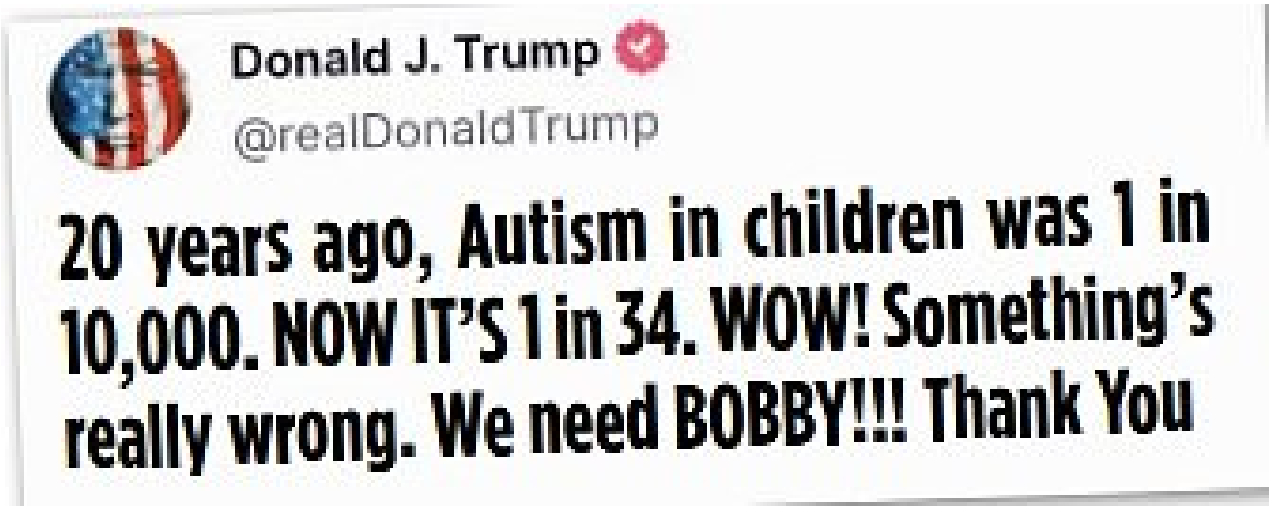
All the science indicates that he's wrong. So does the timeline: vaccines have been around since the end of the 18th century, 150 years before the first cases of autism were identified.

When Kennedy and his ilk make wild claims about what causes the condition, they make life much more difficult for millions of parents who are trying to get the care and education their autistic children need.

Sadly, the instinct of many doctors has been to blame the parents. One of the first psychiatrists to study the condition, Bruno Bettelheim, blamed 'refrigerator mothers' – women who behaved coldly to their newborns – and likened autistic children to those who had grown up in concentration camps.

That theory was debunked in the 1970s, but it has been replaced by unsubstantiated claims that an increase in the average age of parents is to blame. This is despite the obvious fact that many children with autism are born to women in their 20s.

Equally unhelpful are the celebrities and TV personalities who drum up attention for themselves by proclaiming how delighted and relieved they are to 'identify as autistic', often after diagnosing themselves.



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In clinical terms, autism is not shyness or introversion or a preference for your own company. It is a clearly defined medical syndrome, and one of its basic criteria is a deficit in the ability to communicate. Anyone capable of earning a living as a TV presenter is, by definition, very unlikely to be autistic. Discount all of them

and we are still left with an enormous number of children, and a growing number of adults, with serious autism.

There might be a genetic element to it, but the trigger must be something that emerged during the first half of the 20th century and has since become much more prevalent.

Several possibilities leap to mind. Pollution from petrol engines, beginning around 1900 and really becoming significant from the mid-1920s, is an obvious one – yet little research has been done on this as a possible cause.

A study in California, documenting 279 cases and published in the scientific journal JAMA Psychiatry in 2014, compared the incidence of pre-school autism in areas with different levels of traffic pollution.

It found that children growing up in neighbourhoods with high levels of air pollution from roads were three times more likely to be autistic. This also applied to babies whose mothers lived in heavily polluted areas during the last three months of pregnancy.

The researchers suggested particles of diesel fumes in the exhaust pollution could affect brain development. This 'particulate matter' has been shown to cause behaviour that appears to mirror autism in laboratory mice.

Mice exposed to ultra-fine diesel pollution in controlled tests, according to findings published in 2018, showed all the hallmarks of ASD: reduced social interaction, increased repetitive behaviour and reduced communication.

The study also points to the increased use of diesel fuel in recent decades.

The report's authors suggest a number of other possible causes for what they call 'a ten-fold increase' in autism – and say only about a quarter can be attributed to changes in diagnostic practices. Instead, they offer environmental factors such as 'organophosphorus insecticides'. Farmers began using mass pesticides in the second half of the 19th century, and their use has steadily increased ever since.

Given that people with autism often also have digestive problems, and many seem less physically able to expel toxins such as lead and mercury from their bodies, this might be the most plausible guess.

But, so far, the science is shaky. A ten-year study carried out by Dutch scientists, following 784 mothers and their children, failed to find any correlation between autism and the pesticide levels in the women's urine during pregnancy.

But convincing evidence has been discovered that links the condition to microplastics – fragments of plastic that can be 100,000 times smaller than the thickness of a human hair.

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Plastics started to be commonplace in the decades before autism first became known, with the invention of celluloid in the late 19th century, then bakelite, then PVC in 1926. But scientists did not fully appreciate how ubiquitous they had become until this century.

Microplastic particles have been detected everywhere on the planet, from remote mountain ranges to the seabed, and even at the North and South Pole. They are also increasingly present in our bodies, because the water we drink is contaminated with invisible plastic. They can also enter the bloodstream from food that has been wrapped in plastic film, and even through make-up products such as facial scrubs.

One article in the Smithsonian magazine claimed that some people's brains could contain as much as 'a spoon's worth' of plastic.

The evidence is increasing all the time – autopsies suggest the average amount of microplastic in our bodies has increased by 50 per cent since 2016. Plastic is a highly effective barrier to blood flow. Its presence in the brain is linked to dementia, and there is growing speculation it could also trigger – or at least exacerbate – autism.

An Australian study looked at 70 pairs of mothers and babies and found that male children exposed to one type of plastic contamination in the womb were six times as likely to have an autism diagnosis by the age of 11.

The chemical under the microscope was Bisphenol A (BPA), used to strengthen hard plastic in household items such as bottles and food containers. The scientists found BPA suppressed an enzyme in the expectant mothers' bodies called aromatase, vital for healthy growth during foetal gestation. BPA affects male and female gestation differently. This might help explain why autism is five times more prevalent in boys than girls.

Robert Kennedy Jr has seized on the link between autism and plastic. Despite this, one of Donald Trump's first acts as President was to announce that the ban on plastic straws was to be lifted.

Regardless, we must forget the conspiracy theories and pay no attention to the attention-seekers. Medical science urgently needs to discover what causes autism.

Because, in Trump's own words: 'Something's really wrong.'

A Real Boy: How Autism Shattered Our Lives, by Christopher Stevens, is published by Michael O'Mara Books.

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