

Be Wary of CARE Clinics and the Center for Autistic Spectrum Disorders (CASD)

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The Center for Autistic Spectrum Disorders (CASD) was founded in 2001 by Kazuko Curtin. Curtin also did business as CARE Clinics at the same address in Austin Texas. Clinic literature stated that she became interested in "biomedical treatments" when her 2-year-old son (now a teenager) was diagnosed with autism [1]. CARE opened a second clinic in Tampa, Florida in September 2008. However, legal troubles that began shortly afterward led to the closing of both facilities in 2009. This article describes the history of CARE Clinics and the events related to its apparent demise.

"Biomedical Treatment"

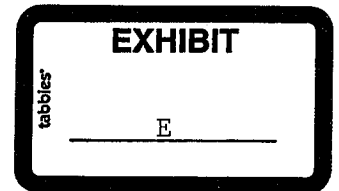
Biomedical treatment for autism is said to correct "biochemical imbalances" and provide "detoxification." [2] It is aggressively promoted through Web sites, blogs, and conferences and by posts on at least five Yahoo newsgroups that have from 4,000 to 13,000 members. CARE Clinics was the lead sponsor of the National Autism Association's 2008 National Autism Conference [3].

In 2008, CARE's Web site stated:

Children with autism commonly have certain genetic predispositions, nutritional deficiencies, immune system compromises, and toxic overloads. To best address these challenges, CARE Clinics develops a personalized care plan which when used over time, cumulatively works to heal each child [4].

and

CARE NutriGenomics provides personalized advice beyond diet, including supplementation and even life style advice based on your assessed Biomarkers, including the genomic valuations that we determine at CARE Clinics. The technology of health science is quickly improving, however, before CARE Clinics, the clinical use of Biomarkers and Nutrigenomics have not yet begun to be sufficiently used for the recovery of our children. In the treatment of cancer, Alzheimer's, anti-aging, and some other conditions, BioMarkers have already been introduced and are making progress. Here at CARE Clinics, we have been successfully treating children by using the latest medical diagnostic technique, CARE Clinics BioMarkers™ to design your child's CARE Clinics Health Blueprint™ and create an individualized treatment plan [5].



CARE literature claimed that its Biomarkers evaluation "helps to identify subtle abnormalities that may prevent the ability to achieve optimal health" and is the "most comprehensive lab testing available." The evaluation includes genomic testing, various routine blood tests; and tests for amino acids; organic acids; peptides; uric acid; oxalates; metallothionein; melatonin; iodine;

kryptopyrrole; essential fatty acids; neurotransmitters; oxidative stress; vitamins and minerals; heavy metals; food allergies; inhalant and mold allergies; viruses; bacteria; intestinal permeability, and thyroid function [1]. **These tests, most of which are nonstandard, have no proven relevance to autistic spectrum disorders.**

All patients underwent a provoked "urine toxic metals test" in which a urine sample is obtained after the patient receives a chelating agent. The chelating agent temporarily increases the excretion of mercury, lead, and/or other metallic substances that are present in trace amounts within the body. The test report, which typically states that the reported levels are elevated, is then used to claim that the child needs to be "detoxified" with chelation therapy [6].

In 2008, the minimum charge for people without insurance appears to have been \$8,500 for the CARE BioMarkers evaluation plus \$500 for a "first-time patient fee." The charges for insured care, however, appear to be much higher. In one case I investigated, the insurance company received bills for screening tests totaling approximately \$49,000 for the child and \$41,000 for the mother! The records indicate clear-cut fraud because many of the tests that were billed for were not done.

CARE's "personalized" treatment plan was said to include amino acid therapy; vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant supplementation; intravenous nutrient therapy; "IV detoxification" (chelation therapy); diet modification; hyperbaric oxygen; ultraviolet light therapy; far infrared sauna; steam ozone sauna; and gastrointestinal treatments (enzymes, probiotics) [1]. CARE's guidebook listed more than 50 "supplements" that might be recommended [1]. **None of these modalities has any proven benefit or plausible rationale for treating autism.**

The labs processing CARE's tests included Doctors Data, Genovation, and The Great Plains Laboratory. The Hopewell Pharmacy and Compounding Center (Hopewell, New Jersey) provides some of the supplement products.

Genetic Testing

The centerpiece of CARE's evaluation was said to be genetic testing performed by Genova Diagnostics (formerly called Great Smokies Diagnostic Laboratory) of Asheville, North Carolina. The tests were claimed to identify genetic data associated with the development of various diseases so that nutritional strategies could reduce the chances of developing those diseases later in life. This concept, while appealing, has no validity and has never been demonstrated to work [7,8]. The test reports themselves included this disclaimer:

This test has been developed and its performance characteristics determined by Genova Diagnostics, Inc. It has not been cleared or approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Commentary is provided to the practitioner for educational purposes, and should not be interpreted as diagnostic and treatment recommendations. Diagnosis and treatment are the responsibility of the practitioner. Any positive findings in the patient's test indicate genetic predisposition that could affect physiologic function and risk of disease. We do not measure every possible genetic variation. The patient may have additional risk that is not measured by this test. Negative findings do not imply that the patient is risk.

In other words: "We'll be happy to pocket the money for providing the test report, but don't hold us responsible for anything it says."

Even worse, the tests did not even appear to be related to autism. CARE's "information guidebook" includes a sample "DetoxiGenomic Profile" report for a 7-year-old boy, which advised that he have

a comprehensive cardiovascular assessment, including an evaluation for high blood pressure [1]. Reports I have seen on another young child include discussions of "health implications" and "treatment options" related to cholesterol regulation, high blood pressure, and blood clotting. None of these conditions had any relationship to the children's actual health or could possibly influence their autistic behavior.

CARE Staff Members

In 2008, CARE Clinic literature included the following members of its "professional team":

- Chief operating officer: Kazuko Grace-Curtin, who was also described as founder and CEO of Nutrigenomics and inventor of "the patented Visual Learning Method Therapy for Children with Autism and Related Disorders." [9] **Note**: The U.S. Patent Office database says that Curtin's learning system was not patented because she failed to respond to requests for further information.
- Research and laboratory director: Anthony Ron Torres, M.D., who directs the immunosciences laboratory at Utah State University.
- Clinical research director: Dennis Odell, M.D., who directs the biomedical division of the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University.
- Medical director (Austin facility): Jesus Antonio Caquias, M.D., who was said to have directed the treatments (including over 10,000 intravenous treatments) since February 2006. He was also identified as "medical consultant" for the Tampa facility. **Note**: Caquias has been disciplined twice by the Texas Board of Medical Examiners. In 2006, the board concluded that he had failed to maintain adequate medical records and ordered him to (a) resign from his role as a gatekeeper in the county indigent program, (b) undergo remedial training in recordkeeping, and (c) have his practice monitored for two years. In 2007, he signed an agreed order under which he was fined \$5,000 and agreed to stop (a) advertising in a manner that would cause confusion to the public, (b) using overly broad claims that would "tend to mislead the public as to cures for diseases" and (c) advertising with references to organizations not recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties.
- Medical director, Care Clinics (Tampa): Lynne Deng, M.D., a board-certified pediatrician said to provide "biomedical treatments as well as conventional primary pediatric care." [She is licensed under the name Hui Ling Deng.]
- Director, nutritional and medical education: Jeff G. Baker, N.D., was said to "work full-time at CARE Clinics, providing his skill and experience in making complex information understandable as part of your child's 'personalized' treatment plan." Before that, for six years, he worked at Genova Diagnostics, which does some of the tests CARE orders. **Note**: Naturopaths are not licensed in Florida or Texas, which means that Baker is not licensed to advise patients.
- Director, CARE Clinics medical staff: Suzanne Bauer, RN, said to be a registered nurse in Florida and Texas.

How "Charitable" Is CASD?

CASD is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that represents itself as a charitable organization. To be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, an organization must be organized and operated exclusively for exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3), and none of its earnings may inure to any private shareholder or individual. The exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3) are charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals. The term charitable is used in its generally accepted legal sense and includes relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of

government; lessening neighborhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency [10].

CASD's federal tax returns state that its program services consist of providing "special testing" for children with autism. They further state:

The testing of autistic children is consistent with our mission of providing services to families with autistic children and to the medical professionals that care for these children. Our testing also serves as an educational service in that the parents are educated on the results of the testing, which better prepares them to care for their autistic child.

The tax returns for the years 2004 through 2007 indicate that a total of \$8,324,010 was delivered as "program services" in the form of 28,710 tests for 2,027 children. The returns also state that CASD received \$8,734,285 as income from its program services [11]. If I understand correctly, the numbers mean that families (or their insurance companies) paid about \$8.7 million for tests.

Data from CASD Form 990 Tax Returns

Category	2004	2005	2006	2007
Gross receipts	\$223,415	\$744,122	\$1,822,067	\$6,504,391
Expenses: management and general	\$61,074	\$180,167	144,446	
Fundraising expenses	\$32,413	\$86,188	0	0
Laboratory expenses	\$12,236		\$315,530	\$1,701,038
Program service income from testing	\$59,044	\$744,122	\$1,822,067	\$6,498,743
Program services provided (testing children)	\$54,639	\$507,067	\$1,257,913	\$6,109,052
Number of children tested	427	150	150	1,300
Number of tests	1,710	2,500	2,500	22,000
Net income from special events (conferences)	\$71,776			
Compensation, Kazuko Curtin as officer/director of CASD as independent contractor	0	\$30,122 0	0 \$203,833	0 \$62,401
Loan to Nutrigenomics to purchase laboratory equipment			\$84,000	

Documents I have collected indicate that when services were rendered to insured patients, some claims were sent from CARE and some from CASD, both of which received payments from insurance companies. I don't know what percentage of their combined income was reported as "program service income" on the Form 990s. Regardless, I doubt that that selling medical tests is a charitable purpose. [Note: The Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders in Vestal, New York, has a similar name but is respectable.]

In January 2009, Curtin announced that the Austin clinic would stop providing medical treatments in January and part of February in order to respond to requests by insurance companies for over 2,000 patient records. She also said that the staff needed time to enable its Web site to provide more information for patients. In May 2009, a newspaper article quoted Curtin as saying that Aetna had

stopped paying and was questioning \$1 million in claims and that Cigna and United Healthcare were also disputing claims. To cope with the paperwork and loss of cash flow, she said, the Austin Clinic would be open only 10 days a month and the Tampa Clinic was temporarily closed. Curtin also indicated that the Texas Medical Board was investigating a complaint against Dr. Caquias that involves "practice inconsistent with public health and welfare—quality of care" and "non-therapeutic prescribing or treatment." [12] In July 2009, the Austin-American Statesman noted that FBI and the Internal Revenue Service had raided the clinic and that it was closed—probably permanently [13].

In February 2009, the U.S. Court of Federal Claims announced that it had found no link between autism and vaccination. In a stunning trio of decisions, Special Masters concluded that no credible evidence exists that MMR (measles/mumps/rubella) or thimerosal-containing vaccines can combine to cause autism. The decisions completely debunked these notions and implied that doctors who misdiagnose heavy metal toxicity and purport to "detoxify" autistic patients are unscientific and unethical [14]. CARE Clinics and its doctors were not parties in the proceedings and were not mentioned in the decisions, but the court's reasoning and conclusions apply equally well to all providers who routinely chelate autistic children.

More Legal Troubles

In July 2009, a civil suit for fraud, negligence, and conspiracy was filed against CARE Clinics, Curtin, Caquias, Baker, and Chicago-based Doctor's Data, the lab that performed urine toxic metal tests. The plaintiff, 43-year-old Ronald Stemp, charges that he was improperly diagnosed and treated over a 10-month period. The suit petition states that Stemp originally sought help for memory loss, inability to sleep, difficulty concentrating, and depression. After going through a battery of tests, he was told that he suffered from heavy metal poisoning and should undergo intravenous chelation therapy 2-4 times a week. The chelation caused Stemp to feel nauseous, lethargic, depressed, constantly drowsy, and weak. He subsequently learned that the diagnosis was incorrect and that the urine test used to diagnose it was a fraud. Stemp's insurance company was reportedly billed for a total of \$180,000 [15].

In September 2009, Doctor's Data sued Curtin for defaulting on payments for lab tests ordered through Nutrigenomics. The claimed amount is \$286,649.39 plus interest and attorneys fees [16].

The Bottom Line

CARE Clinics and CASD offered services that are unsubstantiated and lack a plausible rationale. She also billed insurance companies for services that were not performed. The recent government raid suggests that Kozuko Curtin is headed for serious trouble.

I am interested in hearing from parents about their experiences at CARE Clinics.

I can be reached at (919) 533-6009.

All information provided to me will be kept confidential.

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