

**SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,  
EDUCATION  
HEARING**

**COMBATING AUTISM:  
UNDERTAKING A COORDINATED  
RESPONSE**

Testimony

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April 17, 2007

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Specter, Members of the Subcommittee – it’s my great honor to be here today in the hope that my years of training as an actor and stomaching countless audition rejections have led me to some degree of celebrity which I can put to use, helping you garner the support you need to fully fund the appropriations authorized in the Combating Autism Act.

1 in 10,000 kids will have autism. That’s what top scientists would have told you little more than a decade ago. Then, it became clear that number was ridiculous. And the CDC – with the support of this Subcommittee – started to really look at the prevalence of autism.

1 in 2500, then 1 in 500. By the time the Children’s Health Act of 2000 became law, the estimate had become 1 in 250. A few short years ago, the CDC said 1 in 166.

Now, just a couple of months ago, the best data ever collected produced the scariest number yet – 1 in 150 – 1 out of 94 American boys.

I came to this cause when my college roommate, movie producer Jon Shestack and his wife, Portia Iverson, had their son, Dov, diagnosed with autism and founded the amazing advocacy group, Cure Autism Now, known lovingly as “CAN”.

CAN recently merged with Autism Speaks, founded, as you know, by Bob and Suzanne Wright – on behalf of their grandson. Now this strong national organization is going to make sure that all Americans – and certainly all of our elected officials – understand the urgency of this problem.

As my friend Jon Shestack has said many times – it’s as if 1 in 150 American children was being kidnapped. What would this Congress do if that was the case? What must it do to deal with these sad facts, as they truly are?

I know the enormous burden of your high offices means you must bring to bear a certain stoicism. I also know that most Senators are parents and grandparents. Portia has written a book about Dov – *Strange Son*. Here’s how she describes the kidnapping.

“It was his mind they came for. They came to steal his mind.

Before anyone gave it a name. Even before I knew what it was, I knew it was in our house... They were very, very dark things. And there was no way to get rid of them... When I closed my eyes, I felt their shadows passing over me – I didn’t like to think about where they came from or where they were going. It was too frightening. Dov was only a baby and something was trying to steal him away – I knew that was what they did whenever I accidentally fell asleep – Night after night, I sat beside his crib. I knew he was slipping away from us, away from our world. And there was nothing I could do to stop it from happening. And there was nothing anybody could do, they told me. So I did the only thing I could. I guarded him, although I knew it would do no good, because I could not guard his mind.

And then one day, it had happened. He was gone.ö

And it is even more than just a tragedy for these kids ó many of whom, like Dov, we now know to be of extraordinary intelligence, but trapped in bodies which do not allow them to effectively communicate or interact with the rest of us. It's also a tragedy for families, and for our country.

I recently spoke to one mom who told me ó through her tears ó that she had been forced to abandon her beloved life's work as a nurse ó not mainly to give her more time with her autistic child, but rather to purposely make her family poor enough to qualify for the payment of some of the services her child so desperately needs. She told me, quote, "The one thing I just won't do ó even though I have friends who have ó is get divorced just to qualify for additional benefits.ö

Then there are the cases, which don't make national news but which echo loudly among people who "get it" ó probably about once a month, somewhere in America ó the father of an autistic child kills the child and himself, to end the despair.

Yet, despite all of this, there is some genuinely good news. The unanimous passage, at the end of last year, of the Combating Autism Act, by both Houses of Congress can be a historic turning point. The Act contains, for the first time, specific authorizations of appropriations to combat a single disease ó including biomedical research, public awareness and the consolidation and coordination of federal efforts to ensure the early diagnosis of kids with autism (so they can get, when it matters most, the interventions which can give them the best possible quality of life).

Now the burden falls on you, on this Subcommittee, to turn Congress's promise on autism into reality.

I know how many important matters come before you. I also know none is more important than this. And in no other case, do you have the opportunity and responsibility to fulfill the commitment made in a historic piece of legislation.

I know you will do the right thing.

Thank you.