

What Was the DAN! (Defeat Autism Now) Protocol?



By Lisa Jo Rudy - Reviewed by a board-certified physician.
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Defeat Autism Now (DAN!) was a project of the Autism Research Institute, founded in the 1960s by Dr. Bernard Rimland. DAN! doctors were trained in the "DAN! Protocol," an approach to autism treatment which starts with the idea that autism is a biomedical

disorder. Specifically, DAN! doctors believed that autism is a disorder caused by a combination of lowered immune response, external toxins from vaccines and other sources, and problems caused by certain foods.

The DAN! protocol was founded in 1995, and, during its brief heyday, was well-regarded by a subset of autism parents and researchers who believed strongly in the possibility that autism could be cured through biomedical interventions ranging from nutritional therapy to removal of heavy metals from the body (chelation) to hyperbaric oxygen treatment.

The biomedical approach was particularly popular during the late 1990's and early 2000's. At that time, debate was ongoing about the possibility that ingredients in vaccines -- specifically a preservative called thimerosal and live measles virus -- could be the cause of a sharp increase in cases of autism. Massive international research studies have debunked both of these vaccine-related theories, though there are still those who believe that their autistic children are vaccine-injured.

The Autism Research Institute discontinued the DAN Protocol in 2011.

Part of the reason for this decision related to objections to the name "defeat autism now": people on the spectrum found the concept to be offensive. In addition, according to the Autism Research Institute's press release on the subject:

Although clinicians receive similar and consistent information at the [DAN] seminars, there is no uniform way patients are subsequently treated, even acknowledging individual differences; many perceive the clinician list as a list of recommended doctors--in reality, the list simply contains the names of professionals who attended our clinician seminars. We do not certify them, and as a result, we cannot assure people that every practitioner on the list always provides the highest quality service. We do know that families need a way to locate quality practitioners in their community, and we have added a page of advice on that process to our website.

In addition to the reasons cited above, some of the treatments used by so-called DAN doctors were questionable at best and, in some cases, actually risky. Some of the major interventions suggested by DAN! practitioners included:

- Nutritional supplements, including certain vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and essential fatty acids
- Special diets totally free of gluten (from wheat, barley, rye, and possibly oats) and free of dairy (milk, ice cream, yogurt, etc.)
- Testing for hidden food allergies, and avoidance of allergenic foods
- Treatment of intestinal bacterial/yeast overgrowth (with pro-biotics, supplements and other non-pharmaceutical medications)
- Detoxification of heavy metals through chelation (a potentially hazardous medical procedure)

Today, the Autism Research Institute continues its focus on biomedical issues related to autism. It also, however, supports research on behavioral treatments and genetics. In addition, the Institute provides resources and information for and about adults on the spectrum.

It also investigates some of the most troubling aspects of autism, including aggression and self-aggression.