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Bill to Limit Mercury in Shots OKd

.Gov. Schwarzenegger signs a measure to curb the poison for children under 3 and pregnant women.

By Myron Levin and Nancy Vogel, Times Staff Writers

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Tuesday signed a bill to sharply restrict the mercury content in vaccines for pregnant women and babies, handing a victory to parent activists across the country who have blamed mercury for a surge in autism and other neurological disorders in children.

The bill by Assemblywoman Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills) will prevent expectant mothers and children younger than 3 from getting immunizations with more than trace levels of thimerosal — a preservative used in some vaccines that is about half ethyl mercury — a compound known to damage the nervous system. The restriction will take effect in July 2006.

Vaccine makers and many public health officials say that there is no cause for alarm and that there is no credible evidence of harm to children from the small amounts of mercury in vaccines.

Still, manufacturers in the last few years have voluntarily eliminated thimerosal or reduced it to trace levels with one exception: the flu vaccine made by Aventis Pasteur Inc. The sole supplier of flu inoculations for children under 2 years old, it was the only vaccine manufacturer to openly oppose Pavley's bill.

Aventis released a statement saying that it was disappointed that the bill has become law and concerned that it could undermine public confidence and deter people from getting flu shots for their children.

In a signing message, Schwarzenegger noted that although the best available evidence finds no link between thimerosal and autism, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1999 recommended the removal of thimerosal from childhood vaccines.

"I believe that an abundance of caution merits the acceleration of the process already underway to remove thimerosal from the last few vaccines that contain it, as intended by AB 2943," Schwarzenegger wrote.

Pavley said: "Any time we can reduce public exposure to mercury or any other neurotoxin and there is an alternative readily available, we should be promoting the alternative."

Rick Rollens, a board member of the Autism Society of America and the father of an autistic child who lives in the Sacramento suburb of Granite Bay, said the new law "has sent a strong message that vaccines that contain mercury have no place in the veins of California's pregnant women and young children."