OPINION

Blame it on the rain

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Autism rates are higher in states where it rains more, according to a report that?s in newspapers everywhere today.

Say what?!

When you write about autism, and the many avenues scientists are exploring to pin down its cause, you get used to seeing all kinds of nutty theories bandied about. But this one really takes the cake.

I?m particularly baffled because the research is published in a reasonable journal, the ***Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine***, one of the JAMA/Archives journals, and by scientists and ‘policy analysts? from the more-than-reasonable Cornell University. Not that that makes it any less absurd.

The researchers looked at annual rainfall for California, Oregon and Washington State between 1987 and 1999, and concluded that autism rates are higher when there is a higher rate of rainfall during the children?s first three years.

They come up with all sorts of potential explanations: maybe the children watched more TV because they were indoors, or were more exposed to household chemicals, or maybe they didn?t get enough vitamin D ? or chemicals “in the upper atmosphere that are transported to the surface by precipitation" are to blame.

Or maybe, what they?re seeing is, as any novice scientist or reporter can tell you, a classic case of correlation ? not the same thing, by a long shot, as cause.

As one of my journalism colleagues pointed out, the **accompanying editorial** is delightfully called, “Do these results warrant publication?”

I would have voted no.