

# Oil man's theory on criminals gets notice

**CRUSADE:** He says diet can reform delinquents, and now he has high-up support.

By DANIEL M. WEINTRAUB  
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**SAN CLEMENTE** — Red Hodges is a rough-hewn oil man who's drilled enough wells in his time to know that you can't give up when things don't go the way you hoped.

Now this tireless 66-year-old Orange County resident thinks he is poised to strike intellectual pay dirt in a most unlikely crusade.



**HODGES**

Hodges wants nothing less than to transform the state's criminal justice system. Drawing on research he has culled from around the world, he believes that some people are driven to violence by mood-altering chemical imbalances that may begin in infancy. These malevolent forces, Hodges thinks, can be detected with inexpensive tests and reversed by simple nutritional therapy.

Spurred by a desire to save a troubled son, for 15 years Hodges has been trying to persuade state and federal policymakers to pay attention.

This might be his year. Robert Presley, recently appointed by Gov. Gray Davis to run the state's massive prison system, is an old Hodges ally who thinks the self-described gadfly's theories deserve a more thor-

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# THEORY: Oil man believes diet can reform delinquents

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ough review. And a handful of state lawmakers in both parties are considering legislation to sponsor a study that could validate or debunk what Hodges has been saying.

"I'm confident," Hodges said. "I believe we've got some very significant support. I think we are going to change the criminal justice system of California."

For all his grand hopes, Hodges is hardly arrogant. He refers to himself jokingly as "an air-head" or a "pseudo-scientist" and readily admits that some people think he's a kook. He is a former homebuilder who got wealthy pulling oil from Kern County fields and, as a desperate father trying to explain and change his teen-age son's delinquent behavior, stumbled onto brain chemistry as a possible answer.

That son is 28 now and doing OK, having worked through most of his problems without the aid of neuro-chemists and criminologists. But Hodges is still at it.

The theories he promotes are not entirely his own. Hodges has pulled together research from a number of fields and drawn connections — perhaps taken leaps — that others have been unwilling to make. And he has relentlessly pushed forward, putting, he says, more than \$1 million of his own money into the effort.

Hodges, who has no formal science education or background, believes that shortages or excesses of certain natural elements can alter the brain's chemistry, causing people to act out in aberrant or violent ways. And he is convinced that a combination of nutritional therapies in many cases can stop and possibly reverse the damage that's been done.

Where do the imbalances come from? Hodges says he isn't sure. But much of his work has focused on the metal manganese, which researchers at the University of California, Irvine, found in abundance in the head hair of jail inmates. The scientists did not conclude whether the manganese, a gray-white powdery material in its natural state, was itself connected to criminal behavior, or simply a marker that indicated the presence of some other, unknown factor.

But Hodges found research showing that manganese caused brain damage in mine workers who inhaled it in large amounts. Other studies showed that the metal was absorbed in high levels into the tissue of baby animals deficient in calcium.

And so he suggests that the culprit could be drinking water, gasoline fumes or even soy-based baby formula, which contains as much as 50 times more manganese than mother's milk.

Hodges welcomes doubters enthusiastically, pleading with anyone who will listen to help him test his theories. He knows that the path he treads is well worn by the feet of earlier crusaders, including some who believed that an extra Y chromosome, or a certain head shape, made people prone to criminal behavior. Both theories were later rejected.

"We want clinically controlled, independent studies," Hodges says. "If it doesn't work, we fold up our tent and leave town."

Presley, a former Democratic state senator from Riverside who took over last month as Secretary of Youth and Adult Corrections, says he thinks Hodges is on the right track. Presley has served on the board of Hodges' Violence Research Foundation, and he carried legislation that led to one small study on wards of the California Youth Authority.

That research looked at 402 inmates in two CYA prison camps, who were divided into groups and given vitamin supplements or placebos for 15 weeks. The boys given 100 percent of the U.S. recommended daily allowance of vitamins and minerals showed a 38 percent decline in serious rule violations. The group given placebos actually showed a small but statistically insignificant increase in violations.

Presley pushed for a more comprehensive follow-up study in 1994, but former Gov. Pete Wilson vetoed his legislation in a dispute over who would appoint the

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committee to oversee the research. The idea has been stalled ever since.

Presley, in an interview, said he could not speak for Davis, who has not yet been briefed on the issue. But he said he welcomes proposals to delve further into the value of nutritional supplements as anti-crime measures.

"I'd like to see something come of it so we can prove or disprove this thing one way or another," Presley said. "I think we can prove it's beneficial in reducing violence, and once we get that done, we can do something about getting the treatment to the people who need it."

Louis Gottschalk, a UCI psychiatry professor whose study of the head hair of jail inmates helped launch Hodges on his mission, says the scientific community is rightly skeptical of the theories Hodges is pushing. Gottschalk's application for a grant to study the effect of manganese on rats was rejected several years ago by the National Institute of Mental Health.

But Gottschalk encourages Hodges to keep pressing.

"I think there ought to be more research into it," he said. "I wouldn't have spent, with my colleagues, all the hours necessary to do the grant application if I hadn't thought there was going to be some payoff here."

If the science linking brain chemistry and criminality is still much in dispute, the politics of the matter are also dicey.

Hodges has run into criticism from some who say it's dangerous, perhaps racist, to suggest that a person's brain chemistry might lead him or her to commit crimes. And while traditional liberals might find comfort in a scientific explanation of criminal behavior, some also fear that such research could divert attention from socioeconomic issues, such as poverty or bad schools, that they believe are responsible.

Law-and-order advocates, meanwhile, might have a hard time stomaching a theory that says chemicals, not morality, determine whether a person conforms to society's norms or deviates from them.

But Presley, a conservative Democrat appointed by Wilson to head the state youthful offender parole board, has helped Hodges wade through that political minefield. Last year, before he was appointed to head the prison system, Presley helped persuade Senate Leader John Burton of San Francisco to back Hodges' proposed studies.

Now Senate Republican Leader Ross Johnson of Irvine and Sen. Bill Morrow of Oceanside, whose district includes Hodges' San Clemente home, have taken a look at the issue.

One of them may introduce legislation calling for research into the efficacy of nutritional therapy for troubled youngsters.

"The more I've gotten into this, the more I have thought that there might be something to it," Morrow said. "It's not just hocus-pocus. We're not going to have something done overnight. But it's something that deserves attention and more testing."