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CLAUDIA PAUL For The Times

"IT'S TOO MUCH for most things, but not for the potential of my child speaking," Thomas VanCott says of the $9,000 his family spent on magnetic therapy for his son Jake. But the treatment "just did nothing," he says.

Desperate parents turn to a therapy with little evidence

MERT is being marketed to families of children with autism. Experts have concerns.

By Corinne Purtill

Thomas VanCott compares his son Jake's experience with autism to life on a tightrope. Upset the delicate balance and Jake, 18, plunges into frustration, slapping himself and twisting his neck in seemingly painful ways.

Like many families with children on the autism spectrum, Jake's parents sought treatments beyond traditional speech and behavioral therapies.

One that seemed promising was magnetic e-resonance therapy, or MERT, a magnetic brain stimulation therapy trademarked in 2016 by a Newport Beach-based company called Wave Neuroscience.

The company licensed MERT to private clinics across the country that offered it as a therapy for conditions including depression, PTSD and autism.

Those clinics described MERT as a noninvasive innovation that could improve an autistic child's sleep, social skills and — most attractive to the VanCott family — speech. Jake is minimally verbal.

It was expensive — $9,000 — and not covered by insurance. "It's too much for most things," VanCott said, "but not for the potential of my child speaking."

After raising money through GoFundMe, VanCott met with a doctor at a New Jersey clinic who described how MERT would reorganize Jake's brain waves. VanCott does not have a scientific background, and the technical

[See **Therapy,** A8]

4 years later, Harris' record on policing is scrutinized

Interviews from 2020 provide window into candidate's nuanced view on public safety.

BY KEVIN RECTOR

A few weeks into the largest racial justice protests in modern American history, the lone Black woman in the U.S. Senate appeared on "Good Morning America" to address one of the most controversial aspects of the debate.

Massive crowds had taken to the streets nationwide to protest police killings of Black Americans, including George Floyd. Their demand that U.S. cities "defund police" and reallocate law enforcement funding to social programs was gaining traction. Then-President Trump had criticized the idea as a "radical" one from Democrats, and then-Sen. Kamala Harris — a former prosecutor who'd written a book titled "Smart on Crime" — was asked to respond.

Harris — who is now running against Trump for president — said in the June 2020 telecast that Trump was "creating fear where none is necessary." She said the "status quo" belief that more police officers mean greater public safety is "just wrong," and that what American communities needed was investment in public schools, better access to healthcare, more job opportunities and family incomes that last "through the end of the month."

When ABC's George Stephanopoulos asked if she supported a plan by then-Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and the L.A. City Council to redirect $150 million in police funding to social programs, Harris said she applauded the move. When Stephanopoulos asked if the "bottom line" for her was "fewer police on the streets," Harris again stressed investments rather than cuts.

"We need to recognize that if you invest in communities, they will be healthy, they will be strong, and we won't have a need for the militarization of police," she said. "That doesn't mean we get rid of police. Of course not. But we have to be practical about this."

The interview captured an important moment in America's long fight for racial justice, when Americans were voicing collective outrage and police reform advocates sensed real change was possible after generations of failures.

It also captured a pivotal moment for Harris, who was about six months removed

[See **Harris,** A10]

Nominees tout support by police

With crime a top issue, Harris and Trump depict each other as hostile to public safety. **NATION, A6**

SPC. WILLIAM FRANCO ESPINOSA U.S. Army National Guard

A MEMBER of the California National Guard fires a howitzer during exercises on San Clemente Island.

Live fire suspected in damaging blaze on Navy island base

BY TONY BRISCOE

About 75 miles northwest of San Diego, beyond the view of much of the mainland, the rugged and remote Navy outpost of San Clemente Island remains a mystery to most Californians.

For nine decades, San Clemente Island, the southernmost of the eight Channel Islands, has been owned by the Navy and is largely inaccessible to civilians. Throughout this time the volcanic isle's sprawling shoreline and rolling hills have served as a crucial military training ground where U.S. troops detonate grenades and fire heavy artillery. It's also the Navy's last live-fire range for ship-to-shore bombardments.

So, in late July, few noticed when a catastrophic wildfire swept over more than 13,000 acres of the island outpost. Between July 24 and July 30, the blaze scorched more than a third of the island, damaging more than nine miles of high-voltage power lines, including more than 160 utility lines and a transformer, according to Navy documents.

The fire also swept through parts of the island that have rare habitats for sensitive plant and animal species found nowhere else, such as the endangered San Clemente loggerhead shrike, a carnivorous songbird.

[See **Island,** A12]

How tough on crime will Newsom get?

Governor controls the fate of stricter public safety bills passed by lawmakers.

BY ANABEL SOSA

SACRAMENTO — In response to growing worries about crime in California, the Democratic-controlled Legislature has passed a set of stringent bills that marks a significant change in its approach to criminal justice reform compared with previous years.

Democrats who have recently made a consistent push to reduce prison populations by prioritizing rehabilitation and drug and mental health treatment had to find middle ground with new leadership this year who made alleviating public anxieties about crime a top concern.

As a result, lawmakers voted in favor of stiffer penalties for sex offenders, repeat shoplifters and car burglars, and rejected bills to limit solitary confinement in prisons and expand eligibility for parole. The change marks a complex and controversial moment in the state's debate over balancing public safety with progressive criminal justice goals.

"If we look at the history of California, the pendulum always corrects itself and shifts one way or the other," Jonathan Raven, assistant chief executive of the California District Attorneys Assn., told The Times. "I think now you're seeing the pendulum swinging back."

The association remains a powerful voice on public safety issues in California, and this year it championed a highly contested November ballot measure that, if passed by voters, will send more people to jail for drug possession and property crimes.

What's different this year, Raven said, is that lawmakers are taking action on con-

[See **Crime bills,** A12]

Illustration: Phyx Design; photos: ANNIE NOELKER, JENNIFER MCCORD, ETHAN BENAVIDEZ For The Times

AUTUMN STARS

Make big plans with Jimmy O. Yang, left, Coralie Fargeat, Demi Moore, Margaret Qualley and Shaboozey. **ENTERTAINMENT FALL PREVIEW, E1, F1, S1**

Trans Democrat eyes Senate seat

Lisa Middleton is challenging Sen. Rosilicie Ochoa Bogh, the first GOP Latina state senator. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Rams, Chargers raise the curtain

Matthew Stafford and the Rams visit Detroit. The Jim Harbaugh era begins as Chargers host the Raiders. **SPORTS, D1**

Weather
Dangerous heat.
L.A. Basin: 100/81. **B10**

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