

## Letter to the Editor

### The need to create awareness about autism

Sir,

Autism is a disorder of neural development characterized by a triad of impaired social interaction, impaired communication and restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behavior. The diagnostic criteria require that symptoms become apparent before a child is three years old.<sup>1</sup> Autism affects information processing in the brain by altering how nerve cells and their synapses connect and organize.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of autism is about 1-2 per 1000 people worldwide and it occurs about four times more often in boys than girls.<sup>3</sup> Parents usually notice signs in the first two years of their child's life. Early behavioral, cognitive or speech interventions can help autistic children gain self-care, social and communication skills.<sup>4</sup>

Social deficits distinguish autism and the related autism spectrum disorders from other developmental disorders. Unusual social development becomes apparent early in childhood. Autistic children are less likely to exhibit social understanding, approach others spontaneously, imitate and respond to emotions, communicate nonverbally. About a third to a half of individuals with autism do not develop enough natural speech to meet their daily communication needs.<sup>5</sup> Autistic individuals display many forms of repetitive or restricted behavior such as stereotypy, compulsive behaviour, sameness, ritualistic behaviour and restricted behaviour. An estimated 60%-80% of autistic people have motor signs that include poor muscle tone, poor motor planning and toe walking.<sup>6</sup>

Diagnosis is based on behavior, not cause or mechanism. Autism is defined as exhibiting at least six symptoms total, including at least two symptoms of qualitative impairment in social interaction, at least one symptom of qualitative impairment in communication and at least one symptom of restricted and repetitive behavior. About half of parents of children with autism notice their child's unusual behaviors by age 18 months, and about four-fifths notice by age 24 months. Autism is one of the five Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), which are characterized by widespread abnormalities of social interactions and communication, and severely restricted interests and highly repetitive behavior. Other PDDs include Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder and PDD Not otherwise specified.<sup>7</sup>

The main goals while treating children with autism are to lessen associated deficits and family distress and to increase quality of life and functional independence. No single treatment is best and treatment is typically tailored

to the child's needs. Available approaches include applied behavior analysis, developmental models, structured teaching, speech and language therapy, social skills therapy and occupational therapy. Many medications are used to treat autistic symptoms when behavioral treatment fails. Most common drug classes being prescribed are antidepressants, stimulants and antipsychotics, but no known medication relieves autism's core symptoms of social and communication impairments.<sup>8</sup>

The United nations general assembly has declared April 2 of every year as world autism awareness day and the activities were aimed at increasing and developing world knowledge of the autism epidemic and impart information regarding the importance of early diagnosis and early intervention.<sup>9</sup> Intensive, sustained special education programs and behavior therapy early in life can help children acquire self-care, social, and job skills and often improve functioning and decrease symptom severity and maladaptive behaviors.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, awareness has to be created among the general public about the millions of individuals with autistic disorders worldwide who are undiagnosed, misunderstood and looking for help.

**Raja Danasekaran\*, Kalaivani Annadurai,  
Geetha Mani**

Department of Community Medicine, Shri Sathya Sai  
Medical College & Research Institute, Kancheepuram-  
603108, Tamil Nadu, India

**\*Correspondence to:**  
Dr. Raja Danasekaran  
Email: mailraja84@gmail.com

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