



Ped Med: Autism Myths Abound

By LIDIA WASOWICZ

Misrepresented for decades and still suffering from an identity crisis, autism serves as a lightning rod for myths and misconceptions, researchers say.

A newfound influx of interest and attention in recent years has started to demystify the puzzling condition once blamed on refrigerator moms. Nevertheless, the intractable disorder remains mired in uncertainties and misunderstandings, specialists say.

For example, researchers still can't say for certain whether autism is truly on the rise even though it's clear its diagnosis is skyrocketing.

The latest government report, released Feb. 8, estimates some 1 in 150 8-year-olds or approximately 560,000 children and young adults under age 22 are affected by autistic disorders whose symptoms vary from barely noticeable to severely impairing.

The study, based on records from educational, medical and service centers, noted: "Each year since the early 1990s, special education programs in the United States have been required to report how many children receive services for an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). From 1994 to 2005, the number of children ages 6-21 years receiving services for autism increased from 22,664 to 193,637.

And those numbers likely do not include all children with ASDs, because some children receive special education for a particular need, like speech therapy, and not for a classification of autism.

The report concluded: It is clear that more children than ever before are being diagnosed with an ASD. But, it is unclear how much of this increase is due to changes in how we identify and classify ASDs in people, and how much is due to a true increase in the number of people who have autism and related disorders.

Such uncertainties leave room for ill-founded conjecture and wild speculation, specialists said.

There are a lot of myths, half-truths and outright lies that circulate, and people have no way of differentiating between science and all the mythology, said Steven Gutstein, psychologist, autism specialist, researcher, child, marital and family therapist and co-director of The Connections Center for Family and Personal Development and of the Relationship Development Research Institute in Houston.

Gutstein also is the author of *Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle* (Future Horizons Inc., 2000), which explains the technique he developed for teaching social skills to people affected by the condition whose hallmarks include difficulty in communicating, socializing and imagining.

So many inaccuracies are circulating about the disorder in the media and general public, a special panel of experts was called to address the issue at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, considered one of the nation's most important and highly regarded forums for reporting science research and trends.

It behooves us as scientists to distinguish uninformed stereotypes from scientific reality and to move beyond myths and misconceptions, Morton Gernsbacher, Vilas Research Professor and Sir Frederic Bartlett Professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, told the symposium she organized and chaired.

She took issue with the prevailing notion among researchers that those with autism lack a so-called theory of mind and are thus incapable of comprehending the interests and inclinations of others.

Broadly speaking, theory of mind refers to the cognitive capacity to understand that others possess beliefs, opinions, views, intentions and emotions that differ from our own. It has long been thought autistic people have a deficit in this area.

This assumption, which pervades scientific literature, in fact may have been misconstrued from assessments that require a linguistic sophistication of those being tested, Gernsbacher said.

Because meager communication skills represent a hallmark of autism and count among the diagnostic criteria for the disorder, it is little wonder most autistic children fare poorly on such evaluations, Gernsbacher said.

Other panel members disputed views of an autism epidemic, vaccine links to the disorder and high rates of cognitive impairment among the autistic community.

They contended higher numbers of diagnoses -- likely due to loosened identification criteria -- do not necessarily translate into actual increases in autism rates.

They argued rigorous, large-scale reviews of studies of hundreds of thousands of children fail to support an increasingly popular notion that draws a link between childhood immunization and autism.

They asserted estimates of mental impairment among people with autism have been greatly exaggerated.

I would like scientists to become more skeptical of the stereotypes that flourish about autism and members of society to become more skeptical of the myths that are circulated, Gernsbacher urged.

But, as with the polarizing views surrounding the question of whether mercury and other elements in vaccines can harm children, what is myth to some is the mainstay of truth to others.

Ferretting out the facts can prove frustrating when they lay buried in layers of unresolved riddles. While the newly animated movement to get to the bottom of autism is making ground, it's still stuck on some fundamental questions.

We've got lots of ideas, but actually very little evidence to pin on any single environmental factor, assessed Dr. Thomas Insel, director of the National Institute of

Mental Health.

And that, among other disheartening ramifications, makes the tough task of producing, and picking, optimal treatments for autism all the trickier.

(Note: In this multi-part installment, based on dozens of reports, conferences and interviews, Ped Med is keeping an eye on autism, taking a backward glance at its history and surrounding controversies, facing facts revealed by research and looking forward to treatment enhancements and expansions. Wasowicz is the author of the new book, *Suffer the Child: How the Healthcare System Is Failing Our Future*, published by Capital Books.)

-- UPI Consumer Health welcomes comments on this column. E-mail: lwasowicz@upi.com

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