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AUTISM AWARENESS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Dear Member

With April being World Autism Awareness Month, it is essential for us to highlight the plight of families with autistic children, and how autism spectrum disorder can be managed.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication and, restricted interest. The range and severity of symptoms vary and these include difficulty with communication, social interactions, as well as obsessive interest and repetitive behaviour.

Prevalence in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Across Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an average of one child in every 44 (2.3%) eight-year-old children was estimated to have ASD in 2018, affecting more boys at 4.2% than girls at 3.7%. This disorder occurs across racial and ethnic groups. These three levels are based on level of support needed, social communications and restrictions.



Level 1:

ASD is a mental disorder, it is categorised as DSM-V- Asperger's Syndrome.

Level 2:

Requiring substantial support, marked in verbal and non-verbal social communications skills.

Level 3:

Severe, with pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified.



Treatment approach is multidisciplinary, involving the following specialists and therapists.

Paediatric Neurodevelopmental Professional and Neurophysiologist

- They will be able to diagnose ASD as early as possible from the age of three months, especially when mom is breastfeeding and the child makes no eye contact.
- An EEG (a test that detects electrical activity in one's brain) will be done to rule out any other mental disorders and confirm ASD.

Audiologist and Speech therapist

- An Audiologist is needed to rule out an ear infection or anything that may affect hearing, which might result in poor communication.
- Most children present with poor verbal or non-verbal communication, therefore early intervention by a speech therapist will play a major role. Please note the speech therapist must be using the same language that is used at home, since this has great impact on language and speech development. If a child has delayed speech and is being exposed to many different languages this will worsen the condition.
- Remember that by age two, a child should be forming sentences. If they are not, please see a speech therapist.

Occupational therapist

- ASD is a neurological developmental disability with an estimated prevalence of 1-2%.
- The diversity of disability means that each person's individual experience of autism and need for support and services can vary widely.
- An occupational therapist will be needed for personal, self-care, i.e.; taking a bath, dressing himself or herself, feeding or eating by themselves.
- ASD affects fine and gross motor development.
- Help will be needed with anger management or behaviour and learning, and sensory processing development.

ASD will need about 25 sessions in a year, which will include the following

- Inclusive of initial comprehensive assessment and in-depth interview
- Group sessions
- Home visit, school visit or home program sessions

Psychologist

- Most parents find it difficult to accept diagnosis and don't know how to raise children with ASD, furthermore they don't know how to cope with their anger behaviour and tantrums. This can lead to either the father divorcing the mother or leaving the mother to raise the child alone.
- Communities don't understand ASD and assume the parent/s is/are failing to discipline his/her child. Some think it is witchcraft, and try to shame the child or mother. This leads to many parents becoming depressed and isolated, as they end up not taking the child to church, to the mall or to town, and instead lock the child inside the house.
- Siblings also suffer from not understanding their sister or brother who is autistic, who beats them, who breaks the TV or their toys. It becomes worse when they don't get enough attention from mom, but instead see her giving all the attention and love to the special needs child.
- Therefore, it is important and necessary for the whole family to have sessions with a Psychologist as soon as the child is diagnosed with ASD. This will assist them when coping in the future and prepare them mentally, emotionally as well as financially.
- The community needs to learn to be supportive of the affected parents. If they don't know about ASD, they should Google it or watch shows like Ezempilo/Zwamutakalo with Dr. Pru, where she educates us about Autism in African languages for better understanding.



Dietitians

- Children living with ASD, have high or low sensory systems. They might be sensitive to certain foods eg. tasting something too sugary or salty which will irritate them. Therefore, a Dietitian will play a major role in selecting food that is suitable for your child.

Dentist

- An ASD child has rights to access healthcare services, just like everyone else (Health care Act 27).
- As their behaviour may be aggressive or un-cooperative, not all dentists can deal with an ASD child, however, parents should consult a dentist who specialises in children with special needs. In an instance where the child needs to undergo tooth extraction in theatre, this will require an Anaesthesiologist.

School

- It is currently difficult for parents who have an ASD child to get them to school due to the follow reasons;
- There is a limited number of schools in the country and are not easily accessible.
- Education can be expensive and with the high unemployment rate in SA, many children with ASD may not be attending school.



Remember ASD children can learn and grow to be independent.

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Sizwe Hosmed Disease Risk Department

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