

# Royal College of Psychiatrists

## Debate on a motion on Autism 29/03/18



Autistic people are 7.5 times more likely to kill themselves than non-Autistic people.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are complex but reflect the additional stresses that come with being Autistic in a world where 99% of the population are not Autistic.

### Helping people with autism with their mental health

Many of those with autism are told all their life that they are 'wrong'. Unsurprisingly, this gives them low self-esteem, predisposing them to a range of mental health problems. It follows then, that recognising autism earlier in a person's life will help prevent that. However, most autistic people alive today weren't diagnosed at school.

Roughly 40% of autistic young people have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any time, compared with up to 15% in the general population.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst there is very limited research into the life experience of Autistic adults there is general consensus across all ages and abilities that an early diagnostic assessment helps that person better understand their autism, and how this affect their interaction with the wider world. It follows that better understanding of their autism ensures a better quality of life.

There is no current standard as to what an autism assessment should contain, though there is a general agreement that a simple Autism Yes/No diagnostic opinion is of little use. Diagnostic assessments should include information on which traits are present and how these link into a person's strengths, needs and aspirations. The Royal College Psychiatrists encourages the Government to pursue the development of such an assessment.

People with a 'neuro-typical' brain are often not able to speak the same language as those with autism. The healthcare system is included in this, and the result is that a breakdown in communication threatens the success of mental health treatment.

- 70% of autistic adults say that they are not getting the help they need from social services.
- 70% of autistic adults say that with more support they would feel less isolated.<sup>3</sup>

There are very few examples of CCGs commissioning specialist post diagnostic services other than for complex tertiary inpatient care. Most autistic people will therefore be accessing mainstream services for physical and mental health care needs. Reasonable adjustments must be made in health services to ensure that mental health problems in autistic people are better detected, and that their treatment is as effective as possible.

### Vacancy rates of intellectual disability psychiatrists

Although autism is not an intellectual disability, a large minority of Autistic people do have Intellectual Disability and intellectual disability psychiatrists have the expertise to treat those Autistic people with Intellectual disability and mental health problems.

Unfortunately, the biennial RCPsych 2017 workforce census showed us that there is an above average vacancy rate of consultant intellectual disability psychiatrists. The average vacancy rate across all specialties in psychiatry is 10% (in real terms this means 1 in 10 psychiatry consultant posts are unfilled), and in intellectual disability specialty, this stands at above 12%.<sup>4</sup> Unfilled consultant psychiatrist posts at NHS organisations in England have more than doubled in the last four years.

The vacancy rate for consultant ID psychiatrists increased by 7.8 percentage points between 2013 and 2017. The vacancy rate was almost 2.7 times higher for ID consultants in 2017 than four years earlier.

The more resourced mental health services are which are able to diagnose and treat those who present with autism and mental health problems, the better chances patients have of benefiting from early intervention, and sustained care. This includes the recognition of suicidal ideation.

### **Claims of over diagnosing of autism**

Demand for diagnostic assessments often exceeding the capacity of local services, leading to long waits for diagnosis, are likely to contribute to this.

Diagnoses aren't straightforward. Diagnostic assessments require specialist skills as they can be very complex especially in younger people where traits are less fully developed. They can entail a lengthy process, lasting years.

Neurodevelopmental conditions have significant impact on the lives of young people and their families. Autistic children are more likely to be excluded from school and experience bullying, with lasting effects.

A diagnosis in itself will not dissolve the numerous life-long challenges faced, but it can offer a path towards support and assist the person and their supporters in building upon their strengths.

### **Questions for the Government**

- While there has been significant improvement in numbers of diagnostic assessments offered in recent years but it is still very patchy- how are the government ensuring equity of access across the country?
- Many autistic people, especially those diagnosed in adult life, have very little or no access to post diagnostic support- how will the government improve access to appropriate post diagnostic support across the country?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/208/3/232>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3162631/>

<sup>3</sup> (Bancroft et al (2012). [\*The Way We Are: Autism in 2012\*](#). London: The National Autistic Society)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/RCPsych\\_workforce\\_census\\_report\\_2017.pdf](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/RCPsych_workforce_census_report_2017.pdf)