Autistic Doctors
Not an Oxymoron

Dr Shirley Moore
Dr Mary Doherty
Autism in Doctors

“It should be noted that it is unlikely that someone with severe autism would enter medical school, but it is possible for someone with Asperger’s syndrome (highly performing autism) to qualify in medicine or dentistry.”

Health Education England

- It exists
- It matters
- It is being missed
- What it looks like / how to recognise it
- Asset vs deficit
Pervasive Developmental Disorders (Autism)

- Social impairment
- Communication impairment
- Restricted and repetitive activities and interests
- Early onset
- 2/1000 (0.5/1000 with autism)
- Male: female 3:1
- 50% IQ < 50, 70% < 70 and
- 100% (95%) < 100
Autism

- Social interaction
- Social communication
- Restricted interests
- Repetitive behaviours
- Sensory issues
- Executive dysfunction
- Over inclusiveness

Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests. The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they may vary according to social, educational, or other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities.
Case Study

- 41 year-old ♀ StR in anaesthesia
- MBChB with honours, prizes. FY1/2
- Core training in anaesthesia – 7 years
- Maternity leave & sick leave
- Difficult training – little support
- Dx of Asperger Syndrome made
- Dismissal/III health retirement
Autism in Doctors

• Not new
• Why now?

'Fixing people is easy but life is a mystery', says autistic surgeon

When Vaughan Bowen was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, his debilitating social anxiety was suddenly explained.
Recognising autism in doctors

- Socially awkward, lack of reciprocity
- Perfectionistic, hypercritical
  - Poor tolerance for criticism from others
- Executive function difficulties
  - Delegating, prioritising, multitasking, timekeeping
- Mismatch between paper and practice
  - Underconfident, anxious
  - Unexpected exam failure
    - Oral, practical
- Inflexible
- Informal complaints
- Periods of longterm sick leave with mental health difficulties
The Autistic Doctor
@AutisticDoctor

Medical Doctor. Mother. Autistic. Interest in Mountain Medicine & Mental Health. Passionate about #Autism. #ActuallyAutistic #AutisticDoctor #AutisticHealth

🔗 facebook.com/AutisticDoctor...

Joined September 2018

1,391 Following     1,349 Followers
Severe depression, suicidal. Diagnosed autistic - Aha!!!
That explained everything!
Doing great now, loving life, loving work, and I'm enjoying connecting other autistic doctors together.

I love my job. Really looking forward to work tomorrow.
It's SO much easier to manage now I know I'm actuallyautistic medtwitter

At least I understand the dynamics of what's happening now. Before I knew I was autistic I'd have been so uncomfortable in this situation.
I'm so glad I know I'm #ActuallyAutistic!
The Autistic Doctor
@AutisticDoctor

Medicine selects for Aspie traits. Lots of us actually meet the criteria for diagnosis. All is good until demands exceed capacity to cope, then the wheels fall off. ASD should be specifically considered when doctors present in difficulty.

@aspiedoc1 @Psychautismcham

6:47 PM · Feb 27, 2019 · Twitter Web Client
Prevalence

• 1 in 65 to 1 in 28

• GPs 1%

• GMC FTP 18 cases

• Autistic Doctors International 30

• Expect at least 1-2%
Consequences of undiagnosed autism

- Personal distress
- Professional difficulties
- Career progression
- Change of career
- Stress leave
- Early retirement
- Physical & mental health
- Early mortality

@TheAutisticDoctor

Replying to @ahmedhankir

Same. Recognising that my mental health issues related to undiagnosed autism was the key for me. It’s easy to stay well now that I understand. Look out for autism, there’s lots of us undiagnosed in the MH services.

7:44 AM · Nov 18, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone
Mental Health

- Mental ill health up to 80%
- Excess mortality
- Suicide – an autistic crisis
  - 66% ideation
  - 35% attempted
  - 15% of hospitalized
  - 11% of completed suicides
- It masquerades as...
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Bipolar Disorder
  - OCD
  - Eating Disorder
  - Substance abuse
  - Personality Disorder *BPD*
  - ADHD/Dyslexia/Dyspraxia
Benefit of Diagnosis

• Not broken normal
• Self awareness
• Social challenges
• Sensory challenges
• Community support
• Reasonable adjustments

@TheAutisticDoctor
Awareness of existing autistic staff as well as encouragement of diversity & inclusion in recruitment is just emerging. Expect at least 1%. Support aids retention in a group at high risk for burnout & early exit.

11:16 PM - 10 Apr 2019
My work colleagues have absolutely no idea the amount of effort it takes for me to act like part of the team.

#TotallyExhausted
Autism: the positives

Understanding, embracing and celebrating different ways of thinking and doing can release the true power of the autistic mind. Here we look at the positive features of autism.

Attention to detail
- Thoroughness
- Accuracy

Deep focus
- Concentration
- Freedom from distraction

Methodical approach
- Analytical
- Spotting patterns, repetition

Novel approaches
- Unique thought processes
- Innovative solutions

Observational skills
- Listen, look, learn approach
- Fact finding

Creativity
- Distinctive imagination
- Expression of ideas
Absorb and retain facts
- Excellent long term memory
- Superior recall

Tenacity and resilience
- Determination
- Challenge opinions

Visual skills
- Visual learning and recall
- Detail-focused

Accepting of difference
- Less likely to judge others
- May question norms

Expertise
- In-depth knowledge
- High level of skills

Integrity
- Honesty, loyalty
- Commitment

⚠ Remember
Every experience of autism is unique. No one person will identify with every positive feature of autism. We all have individual skills, attributes and characteristics that are as unique as our personalities – this is the power of neurodiversity.

Harriet Cannon
Disability Services, February 2018
What to look out for?

- 10 item questionnaire
- Nice guidelines
- A screening tool
- Refer for assessment if > 6

**AQ-10**

Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ)

A quick referral guide for adults with suspected autism who do not have a learning disability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Please tick one option per question only:</th>
<th>Definitely Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Definitely Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I often notice small sounds when others do not.</td>
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<td>2. I usually concentrate more on the whole picture, rather than the small details</td>
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<td>3. I find it easy to do more than one thing at once</td>
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<td>4. If there is an interruption, I can switch back to what I was doing very quickly</td>
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<td>5. I find it easy to 'read between the lines' when someone is talking to me</td>
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<td>6. I know how to tell if someone listening to me is getting bored</td>
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<td>7. When I'm reading a story I find it difficult to work out the characters' intentions</td>
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<td>8. I like to collect information about categories of things (e.g. types of car, types of bird, types of train, types of plant etc.)</td>
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<td>9. I find it easy to work out what someone is thinking or feeling just by looking at their face</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I find it difficult to work out people's intentions</td>
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</table>

**SCORING:** Only 1 point can be scored for each question. Score 1 point for Definitely Agree or Slightly Agree on each of items 1, 7, 8, and 10. Score 1 point for Definitely or Slightly Disagree on each of items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9. If the individual scores less than 6 out of 10, refer them for a specialist diagnostic assessment.

This test is recommended in ‘Autism recognition, referral, diagnosis and management of adults on the autism spectrum’ (NICE clinical guideline CG142): [www.nice.org.uk/CG142](http://www.nice.org.uk/CG142).


**https://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc_tests**
Conclusion

- Beware knowledge gap
- Think beyond stereotypes
- Heterogenous presentation
- Specialist advice

- Add autism to differential diagnosis
- Recognise and build on the benefits of autism
- Resist tragedy narrative
Contacts

shirleymoore@doctors.org.uk
@aspiedoc1

drmdoherty@gmail.com
@AutisticDoctor