OPINION

General practitioners urgently need autism training

BY **LAURA CRANE, LIZ PELLICANO, THE CONVERSATION**

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Most of us get slightly anxious about going to the general practitioner. What if it turns out that nothing's wrong? Or perhaps there's something seriously wrong?

Despite these minor concerns, most of us are happy to book an appointment, turn up at the practice and talk to a doctor about our health problem. But what if you have autism? What if you have trouble communicating verbally and yet the only way to book an appointment is over the phone? What if your experience of pain is different from that of other people, and you can't work out whether you need to go to the general practitioner in the first place? What if the sounds and smells of the doctor's waiting room are too overwhelming for you to even enter the building?

Even though autistic people might have many concerns about going to the general practitioner -- concerns that are probably different from ones most people have -- at least they'll be talking to someone with knowledge and experience of autism, right?

The Centre for Research in Autism and Education at University College London recently teamed up with the **Royal College of General Practitioners** to find out how much general practitioners know about autism, whether they had any autism training and what their experiences were of working with their autistic patients. Shockingly, **the results** showed that, of the 304 general practitioners surveyed, 39 percent had not received any autism training. What's more, of the ones who had received autism training, almost 40 percent didn't find it very useful. It is not surprising, then, that general practitioners also reported having little confidence in caring for their autistic patients. Given that autism affects one in 100 people -- **more than 700,000 people in the United Kingdom** -- these are deeply troubling findings.

Tacit knowledge:

To compensate for their lack of training, general practitioners seem to be relying on their own experiences of autism -- through autistic family members, friends or colleagues -- as a source of tacit knowledge. Yet autism affects different people in different ways. An over-reliance on personal knowledge of autism might lead to doctors having a narrow, idiosyncratic view of autism. This could result in general practitioners missing the signs of autism, especially in people who don't neatly fit the **autism stereotype** (such as **women and girls**). Getting an autism diagnosis is difficult enough, with lengthy delays of around **two years for adults** and **three-and-a-half years for children**. As general practitioners tend to be the first port of call for parents or adults seeking help for a suspected autism diagnosis, they play a key role in ensuring that the process of accessing a diagnosis starts smoothly and swiftly.

General practitioners have a duty of care to their autistic patients, who are a particularly vulnerable group. While the latest figures suggest that **two-thirds** of people will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime, rates of mental health problems are much higher in both autistic **children** and **adults**. Autistic people also have higher rates of medical problems such as **epilepsy** and are more likely to **die prematurely**.

Respectful, accessible and tailored:

Better services to meet the needs of autistic individuals are urgently needed. Encouragingly, the **Royal College of General Practitioners** has recognized autism as a priority area and has developed **tools and training resources** to support general practitioners in their practice. But the need for change extends beyond these doctors. **Research from the United States** highlights how autistic people aren't satisfied with their experiences of healthcare more generally. This is partly because healthcare providers (including doctors, nurses and other medical staff) don't have much knowledge of autism, but also because healthcare providers are often **unwilling or unable** to make accommodations to overcome some of the specific challenges noted by autistic people.

It's not clear what the future holds for the British healthcare system. This lack of certainty can be especially challenging for autistic people and their families, who often get a rough deal even at times of relative stability. What is clear, however, is that now -- more than ever -- autism must be a priority. From the receptionist at the general practitioner's office to the doctors and nurses working with autistic patients, to the healthcare commissioners overseeing services, everyone must commit to working with -- rather than for -- autistic people and their families. Ensuring that healthcare is respectful, accessible and tailored to the specific needs of autistic people are the first steps to achieving this goal.

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