

NEWS

# Health-care barriers prevent many autistic people from seeking medical treatment

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10 MARCH 2022

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Many autistic people with a serious or life-threatening condition **do not seek medical care**, according to a new study. The most common health-care barriers include difficulties communicating with physicians or making appointments by telephone.

“For me, as a physician, to realize that patients are sitting at home with medically serious conditions, unable to access health care or pick up the phone and call an ambulance when they need an ambulance, it’s absolutely shocking,” says lead investigator **Mary Doherty**, founder of **Autistic Doctors International** and consultant anesthetist at Our Lady’s Hospital in Navan, Ireland.

The data come from a 52-item online survey of 507 autistic and 157 non-autistic people who were recruited through social media and live mainly in the United Kingdom or Ireland. Doherty began developing the survey in consultation with autistic attendees at the **2018 Autscape conference** in Tonbridge, England. Some survey questions were multiple-choice or yes-no, and others were open ended.

Among the autistic respondents, 77 percent had a formal diagnosis, 23 percent self-identified as autistic but did not have a diagnosis, and 62 percent were women. The median age for both groups was 38 years.

In Ireland, there is no pathway to an autism diagnosis through the national health system; the only way to be diagnosed “is via private services, which means autistic adults are largely invisible in

health care,” Doherty says. Receiving a formal diagnosis in Ireland can **take several years** after a referral from a general practitioner.

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