

SPOTTED

# Spotted: Brain boom; cure conundrum

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## Brain boom

In the 2 March issue of *Forbes*, an article forecasts a **boom in 'brain medicines'** — drugs to treat a range of neurodegenerative and psychiatric disorders, including autism. The article highlights work by **Ricardo Dolmetsch**, global head of neuroscience at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research in Boston, who helped to pioneer a new stem-cell-based system to screen drugs for the autism-linked disorder **Timothy syndrome**. “I want to restart neuroscience,” he told *Forbes*. Dolmetsch, **whom we profiled** several years ago, was inspired to study autism after his son was diagnosed with the disorder.

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## Cure conundrum

A long article published 18 February in *Newsweek* tackles **a touchy topic in autism**: Is it a disorder to be cured, or a difference to be celebrated? For Jonathan Mitchell, a 59-year-old with autism, the answer is simple. “It’s a horrible disability,” he says. “I wish there were a cure.” People on the other side of the fence, dubbed neurodiversity advocates, call Mitchell “a hater” and

“a threat to the stability of the autistic community.”

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## Total recall

A person’s inability to accurately recall past events has long been considered a limitation in epidemiological studies, particularly those probing environmental risk factors for disorders such as autism. But a study published 6 February in the *Maternal Child Health Journal* suggests that memory may stack up to medical records after all. Researchers found that mothers of children diagnosed with autism are quite good at **remembering certain details** about their health during pregnancy, such as their blood pressure and whether they had gestational diabetes. That result is great news, given that collecting detailed medical histories during epidemiological studies can be expensive.

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## Into the void

An article in *Science News* that came out 10 February looks at the **lack of support** for the growing number of adults with autism. It highlights the proliferation of promising interventions aimed at infants and young children. “There isn’t anything analogous to that for adults,” says **Leann Smith**, a developmental psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Smith is looking for ways to ease the transition into adulthood, which has been likened to “falling off a cliff” because of the sudden dearth of services. Reducing stress among young adults with autism by teaching them

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copied strategies and problem-solving skills is one way she hopes to help them find jobs and make friends.

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## Necessary noise

One theory about autism holds that the **brain is unusually 'noisy'** in people with the disorder, showing patterns of signaling that are more variable than those seen in controls. But a new paper, published 19 February in *Autism*, argues that this idiosyncrasy, dubbed 'neural noise,' may actually be **lacking in people with autism**. The paper outlines how a certain level of neural noise makes it easier to switch attention between tasks and look beyond details to see the big picture — behaviors that are challenging for people with autism.

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