

SPOTTED

Spotted: Small scissors; fish flop

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WEEK OF MARCH 30TH

Autism awareness

April is Autism Awareness Month, in which **world monuments 'light it up blue,'** shining blue lights to spread the word about the disorder. But it's a dark month for Kim Stagliano, who has three daughters with autism. "For families living with autism, reality is far more sober, and their needs extend far beyond 'awareness,'" Stagliano **wrote in an editorial** yesterday in *The Washington Post*. "For me, this should be a month of solemn acknowledgement and education about a global crisis."

Small scissors

The gene-editing tool CRISPR can quickly **cut out, splice in, activate** and **mutate** genes in cells. But the large size of the tool's scissorlike enzyme, CAS9, makes it tricky to use in living animals. Now researchers have found a way to **shrink CRISPR down**. They used the new system, called CRISPR-SaCAS9, to introduce a cholesterol-regulating gene into the livers of mice. The new gene lowered cholesterol levels in the mice for four weeks, according to the study, published 1 April in *Nature*. The tweaked tool could help researchers target mutations in mouse models of autism.

Big neuron

Those awe-inspiring **three-dimensional renderings** of neurons are about to get a little prettier. A new project dubbed **BigNeuron**, spearheaded by the **Allen Institute for Brain Science** in Seattle, aims to establish best practices for **imaging individual neurons**. This effort could help researchers home in on **neuronal structures altered in autism**. "In our quest to learn how the brain works, one of the fundamental steps is to understand how neurons function, and an individual neuron's shape is a major contributor to its role in the brain," Allan Jones, the institute's chief

executive officer, said in a statement 31 March.

Fish flop

Omega-3 fatty acid supplements do not improve language skills or the ability to function in daily life in children with autism, according to results of **a six-month trial**. The randomized, placebo controlled trial, published 21 March in *Molecular Autism*, adds to **mounting evidence** that the fish-oil-based supplements have no effect on autism symptoms. Many parents may be disappointed by this message. A 2007 study probing supplement use among families of children with autism revealed that nearly one in four caregivers **provide supplements**, including omega-3s, as an alternative approach to treating the disorder.

Taking shape

Are mice more likely to interact in a square cage with cozy corners or in a circular one? It's an important question for researchers studying social behavior in mouse models of autism. News bulletin: The **shape of the cage doesn't matter**. Male mice are just as likely to nuzzle noses or vocalize in either environment, according to a study published 25 March in *PLoS One*.
