

Commentary

Increased Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder is a Public Health Concern

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Just a few years ago, the term, autism spectrum disorder, was not part of our everyday conversation. When the term is used today, many people still raise their eyebrows seeking additional information. They may say that they do not know what autism spectrum disorder is, or they may not know a person with the condition. However, autism spectrum disorder is closer than you may think. Autism spectrum disorder rates are steadily on the rise and are increasing in children, leading to negative health outcomes and life-long disability. Unfortunately, the prevalence rates have skyrocketed by triple digits over the last three years.

The increased prevalence of autism spectrum disorder rates will ultimately affect every profession servicing children, youth, and eventually young adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention publication, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (Baio, 2014), autism spectrum disorder affects 1 in 68 children. The 2014 estimate is roughly 30% higher than the estimate for 2008 which was 1 in 88 (Autism Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 2014). Prevalence rates have increased 10 to 17 percent annually in recent years (Autism Speaks, 2014a). A new case is being diagnosed every 20 minutes (Buttross et al., 2007).

These rates continue to increase due to parents, pediatric doctors, and other professionals becoming more familiar with autism spectrum disorder, recognizing the signs and symptoms, and parents reporting concerns to their healthcare professionals. Increased awareness such as: the month of April being National Autism Awareness Month, autism-specific annual summer camps, annual walks, conferences, and recent local recognition of Autism Awareness Month by Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant's office, and the Office of the Mayor of Jackson (MS) at City Hall.

Today, autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, costing a family an average of \$60,000 annually. There is no medical detection or cure for autism (Autism Speakers, 2014b).

Autism affects persons of any race, socioeconomic status, and gender. However, it is more prevalent in boys with, 1 in 42 boys having autism spectrum disorder compared to 1 in 189 girls; and boys are at a five times higher risk than girls of being identified with autism spectrum disorder. An estimated 13,166 individuals in Mississippi have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (Le Coz, 2013).

According to the Data Accountability Center (as cited in Mississippi Autism Advisory Committee Report to the Legislature, July 2012, p. 8), statistics from the Mississippi Department of Education show a 462 percent increase in children with autism within the past 10 years who attend public schools in the state. This trend is likely to rise, rather than decline.

With steadily increasing rates of autism spectrum disorder, what does this mean for our communities and how will healthcare professionals, service professionals, teachers and our communities address this public health issue? The focus of the CDC is to increase education, advocate for and assist families and healthcare professionals. The CDC recommends the ACT Early Campaign to educate and assist with early detection of autism spectrum disorder. Did you know that there is no staff person at any state agency in Jackson, Mississippi whose primary responsibility is to coordinate services or training for either professionals working with autism or individuals with autism? There are also no autism-specific training programs or certifications at any of our public universities and colleges (Mississippi Autism Advisory Committee Report, 2012). Mississippi can do better in serving our children. To quote a great writer, Pearl S. Buck, “If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all” (Brainyquote.com, n.d.).

In closing, the autism population in Mississippi is growing rapidly. During some point in our careers, in the arena of public health, education, and community service work we will encounter individuals who fall on the autism spectrum. Being prepared for this time will make all the difference in the approach and outcome of the encounter. The public health community, educators, and medical professionals must work collaboratively to address the education, health care, and employment needs of these individuals. This will assist individuals and their families by providing access to healthy and sustainable life-long successes. John Whitehead wrote in *The Stealing of America*, (1983, p. 116) “Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see”. My hope is that this article will inspire you to commit to making the lives of children and individuals with autism a safe and healthy place to grow and thrive.

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