Autism - Need for Awareness

Geeta Gore*, JV Pai-Dhungat**

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by qualitative abnormalities in social interactions, markedly aberrant communication skills, and restricted repetitive behaviors, interests, and activities. Diagnostic criteria Under DSM-IV-TR require that symptoms become apparent before the child is 3 year old. However, autism is not a single disorder, but a spectrum of closely related disorders with a shared core of symptoms. The signs and symptoms of autism vary widely, and so do its effects. Classic autism, or autistic disorder, is the most severe of the autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Milder variants are Asperger’s Syndrome, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified), or atypical autism.

The word “autism,” has been in use for about 100 years. It comes from the Greek word “autos,” meaning “self.” The term describes conditions in which a person is removed from social interaction -- hence, an isolated self.

Eugene Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, was the first person to use the term around 1911. He started using it to refer to a group of symptoms of schizophrenia that mean morbid admiration and withdrawal into self. In 1940, Leo Kranner and Hans Asperger pioneered autism research. Kranner described children who were severely affected while Asperger described less disabled children. Autism came to be better known in the 1970s though it was still confused with mental retardation and psychosis. However, it was in the 1980s that research in autism gained momentum.

Basic social interaction can be difficult for these children, as they prefer to live in their own world, aloof and detached from others. They dislike being touched, held, or cuddled. Speech abnormalities are common and take the form of language delays and deviations. In addition, they have trouble picking up on subtle nonverbal cues and using body language. They avoid eye contact, and react unusually to sights, smells, textures, and sounds, coming across as cold or “robot-like.” They may be especially sensitive to loud noises. Abnormal posture, clumsiness, or eccentric ways of moving are noticed in them. These children display repetitive actions or movements, known as self-stimulatory behavior, common ones observed in them being hand flapping, rocking back and forth, spinning in a circle, finger flicking, head banging, staring at light, moving fingers in front of the eyes etc.

Etiology of autism is not known. Until recently, most scientists believed that it was caused mostly by genetic factors, but new research indicates that maternal environmental factors such as viral infections, dietary imbalances and
exposure to environmental chemicals may be just as important in the development of autism. Controversy regarding MMR vaccine emerged in 1998, but the final scientific consensus is that no evidence links MMR vaccine to the development of autism and that the vaccine’s benefits greatly outweigh its risks. ASD is most probably caused by multiple factors interacting in complex ways i.e. genes, environment and the developing brain.

The team members involved in the management of ASD are pediatrician observing mile stones, speech language pathologist and audiologist, occupational therapist and psychologist. Special educators manage academic needs. Health professionals plan treatment to match the person’s particular needs, strengths and difficulties. Beginning the treatment early in infancy increases the likelihood of a favorable outcome. Parents understandably become exhausted by the relentless exhibition of challenging behaviors by their autistic child. A specially trained educator or behavioral psychologist can help in teaching effective ways to modify these challenging behaviors. The possible benefits from pharmacotherapy must be balanced against the likely adverse effects on a case to case basis. ASD is similar to other neurodevelopment disabilities. Generally it is not “curable,” and requires long term management. It is important that physicians are well aware of the condition and guide the parents and the patient to the proper centre. World Autism Day is celebrated on 4th of April every year.