

Raising awareness of autism spectrum disorder



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Autism is a brain developmental disorder that affects how a person interacts and communicates with other people. While all people with autism spectrum disorder share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways. For example, some people with autism can live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sound, touch, light, smell and taste.

It can be difficult to create awareness of autism as people with the condition do not 'look' disabled – parents of children with autism often say that people think their child is naughty, while autistic adults find that they are misunderstood. All people with autism can benefit from a timely diagnosis and access to appropriate services and support.

April 2nd was declared World Autism Awareness Day by the United Nations to bring international attention to autism, raise awareness and highlight the insufficient support that patients receive.

Around the world many countries honoured the day with various campaign launches and fundraising events to increase awareness. Here in the UK, the National Autistic Society arranged a week-long run of events including sponsored night walks through London and baking cakes. Schools were actively encouraged to participate and the Society's website dedicated some pages with fundraising ideas and tips to raise money for those needing support.

In the US, autism is the fastest-growing developmental disorder and now affects 1 in 68 children. Many celebrities there, including actor William Shatner and singer Toni Braxton, took to Twitter to support the 'Light it up blue' campaign to raise awareness for autism spectrum disorders. This international effort encourages iconic buildings and landmarks around the world to illuminate in blue, the official colour of autism awareness. Last year, nearly 3,000 buildings in over 600 cities and 45 countries were illuminated in blue. These included the Empire State Building in New York, Tokyo Tower in Japan, the Sydney Opera House in Australia and Dubai's Burj Al Arab, as well as museums, bridges, airports and concert halls around the world.

The Dubai Autism Centre (DAC) celebrated the day by vowing to get autistic children integrated into society. It launched a campaign 'Accept me the way I am, I am a child of autism', a message being relayed across schools, communities and families. Since November, Goals UAE have organised after-school football training sessions for children with autism, raising awareness and also helping to integrate autistic children into the community. One of the problems that children with autism have to deal with is the inability to engage in group activities and interact with others, making sports a

great way to help with integration.

However, it is not just children that need support. For many parents of autism sufferers, the big concern is not about passing exams at school, but what happens as they get older. They hope that their child is going to be as independent as they can be, and be as safe and happy as possible as an adult. In March next year, the UAE will hold its first international disabilities and special-needs conference to share expertise and discuss ways of increasing inclusion in schools and workplaces. Businesses are being encouraged to open their doors to the idea of employees with disabilities.

Events such as World Autism Awareness Day go a long way to helping not only those suffering with autism, but educating those who know little about it. As more and more campaigns are launched, we can all do our bit to spread the word and open our doors – as well as our hearts – to those suffering with this condition. MEH

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