

Conference briefings

Therapeutic approaches to autism: research and practice*

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This, the third in a series of annual conferences, took treatment as its theme, the biological and psychological anomalies of autism being addressed in previous years. As before, the size was limited to about 50 people but, because of the Gulf war, this year's attendance was predominantly British.

A wide-ranging and sometimes rugged variety of treatments are promoted for autism and attract substantial amounts of money from parents and local authorities. Each philosophy has its practitioner-advocate who presents a testimony of success with a religious conviction on the basis of their subjective observation of a small number of cases, selected because they have stayed the course. The Nottingham team gave a particularly helpful overview of the field with a comparative study which included several types of special school as well as Waldon and Holding Therapies. The results have yet to be quantified and this will not be easy as many of the children receive a mixture of therapies in a variety of non-residential settings. Other presentations were of an initial evaluation of Daily Life Therapy from the Boston Higashi School and a Norwegian study of the effectiveness of low casein and gluten diets. These were hampered by their lack of suitable comparisons to control for age-related or spontaneous change.

Reviews of other approaches included the Option Method and low social intrusion teaching as well as

**A conference held at Durham University, from 3 to 6 April 1991, arranged by the National Autistic Society and Autism Europe.*

some practical strategies to teach social empathy. As in the blind men's description of an elephant, differing views revealed different facets of a complex syndrome. For example, a Canadian account which focused on sensory perceptions suggested that a form of signal overload, the imbalance and volume of auditory or visual input, might contribute to social withdrawal.

Although the therapeutic emphasis was on childhood, the growing concern about adult habilitation was acknowledged in presentations of the Irish and Seaham communities, the latter including a visit. The Irish community, self-sufficient in the monastic tradition, made a contrast with Seaham which leans towards the integrated small staffed house of 'care in the community'. From the resident's viewpoint they have much in common in their emphasis on the acquisition of social and domestic skills.

Such well-publicised choice has two main effects. The first is to leave families wondering whether they have done all that they might; the second is to encourage them to shop on. Most evaluations promote the positive effects of treatment but, in their neglect of the drop-out, overlook any adverse effects either on the child or on its family. The treatment of most psychiatric disorders has moved through a similar scientific dark age, characterised by the uncertain but enthusiastic exploration of a variety of therapies. Autism is no exception and meetings such as this help damage-limitation by giving some sense of proportion.

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Hearing voices*

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This was the second UK conference organised by, and for, people who 'hear voices'. It offered an opportunity for people to meet outside a psychiatric

**A national conference organised by Lambeth Link Self-Advocacy Project, at the International Students' House, Great Portland Street, London, 22 March 1991.*

environment to discuss their experiences, and promoted the formation of a national network of 'Hearing Voices' self-help groups.

The conference was inspired principally by the work of Professor Marius Romme, Professor of Social Psychiatry, Limburg University, Maastricht,