

## Correspondence

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### Letter to the Editor

The need for specific training for law enforcement officials in relation to assisting those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been highlighted in literature (Crane *et al.* 2016).

From an Irish perspective, the interim report of the Interdepartmental Group to examine issues relating to people with mental illness who come in contact with the criminal justice system in Ireland (Department of Justice, 2016) and A Vision for Change (Department of Health and Children, 2006) raise the importance of interagency working to address the needs of those with mental disorder who come to the attention of the law. The former makes specific recommendations in relation to diversion at the point of arrest and/or custody through the involvement of An Garda Síochána.

As highlighted by Dein & Woodbury-Smith (2009), individuals with an ASD, including Asperger syndrome who offend, represent a small but significant group. Murphy (2010) notes that in the case of ASD, regardless of the offence committed, there is rarely a single responsible factor, with most explanations being framed in terms of the associated cognitive, sensory and social naivety difficulties and that dealing with sensory overload or hypersensitivity is relevant.

Put simply, someone with an autism spectrum may not know when they have done something that offends someone, and therefore that they have done something wrong. If approached by uniformed officers, elevated anxiety may cause a meltdown and elevated arousal

which may be perceived as aggression, causing further distress for the individual and an increased likelihood of arrest.

Crane *et al.* (2016) report that 37% of those surveyed in a police force had received training in ASD and 42% felt satisfied with how they had worked with someone with an ASD. Doward (2016) cites that seven out of 10 autistic individuals in contact with the police reported 'being troubled' by the encounter.

On invitation, we undertook a pilot 90-minute training session on autism awareness for a small cohort of members ( $n = 11$ ) of An Garda Síochána through the Continuous Professional Development unit based at the county headquarters for Cork. This unit trains two different police divisions representing 7.78% of the entire Garda Force. Training was delivered by a Consultant Psychiatrist with experience in the diagnosis and management of autism. Content was focused on awareness around ASD, communication strategies and managing those experiencing a meltdown.

We used Likert scales to assess five measures before and after the training programme. Participants were asked to indicate the answer they most agreed with on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = no, 10 = yes). We analysed mean scores before and after the training session using a paired *t*-test and found statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). Mean scores are presented in Table 1.

Our pilot study showed promising results from a simple intervention in terms of improved awareness, confidence around communication strategies and confidence on approaching individuals experiencing a meltdown. Should similar training be rolled out regionally and nationally, it is hoped that this will lead at the very least to a reduction in distress in those with ASD

**Table 1.** Pre- and post-training mean Likert scores

	Pre-training ( $n = 10$ ) [Mean (S.D.)]	Post-training ( $n = 11$ ) [Mean (S.D.)]	<i>p</i>
Question 1: I have an understanding of what autistic spectrum disorder is	4.9 (1.5)	7.9 (1.4)	<0.0001
Question 2: I understand the common difficulties those with autistic spectrum disorder experience	4.7 (1.7)	8.3 (1.6)	<0.0001
Question 3: I feel I know strategies to help me communicate with those who have autistic spectrum disorders	4.1 (2.1)	9.8 (1.4)	<0.0001
Question 4: I know how to approach those who are experiencing a 'meltdown'	4 (2.2)	8.8 (1.3)	<0.0001
Question 5: This training will help me in my day-to-day work	7.5 (1.6)	8.8 (1.2)	0.0474

who find themselves in contact with the law, and at best to a reduction in arrest rates and appropriate diversion.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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