Major changes in the diagnosis of autism to be debated at international conference in Trinity College Dublin

Implications of the controversial dropping of Asperger’s Disorder from DSM-5 Diagnostic System to be addressed and discussed

A ground breaking two-day international conference entitled Challenging DSM-5 is being held at Trinity College, Dublin on Friday 8th and Saturday 9th November 2013 to discuss and debate controversial changes in the diagnosis of autism and the dropping of Asperger's Disorder (AS) from the DSM-5 American diagnostic system.

The new DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), produced by the American Psychiatric Association, has dropped Asperger’s Disorder and absorbed it into the general diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. This move is being viewed as problematic for many in the Irish health and education system including Aspire, the Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland, who believe that it is a mistake to put everyone under the one umbrella of autism spectrum disorder.

According to Des McKernan, Hon. Secretary of Aspire: “DSM-5 will have major implications for families awaiting diagnosis for their children and for people already diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. The immediate problem is that those who have already been diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder do not know what their actual diagnosis is at the moment and they are also worried about losing the services they have - particularly with all the cut-backs going on at the moment. Some adults with Asperger’s have remarked that they feel a loss of identity - a bit like telling you that you can no longer call yourself Irish but must just call yourself a European”.

Michael Fitzgerald, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin, added: “These recent changes to DSM are unfortunate and unhelpful. We need to lobby the World Health Organisation not to make the same mistake with ICD10 (10th revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems).

Asperger’s Disorder under the previous DSM (DSM-4) published in 1994 was recognised as a form of high-functioning autism with its own set of criteria such as the absence of any language delay in a child. Aspire estimates that about 15,000 people in Ireland are affected by Asperger's Disorder.

The Challenging DSM-5 conference will highlight research carried out by Dr Carmel O’Sullivan, Head of the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, which has led to a much improved understanding of high functioning autism. Dr O’Sullivan will present and discuss the results of a major intervention into the development of social and communication skills for children and adolescents affected by high functioning autism through the use of a special type of drama called Social Drama.
Dr. O’ Sullivan has identified 12 sub-types of Asperger’s Disorder through her ground breaking research with children over the past nine years. These sub-types allow for greater precision of diagnosis which will lead to a much better understanding of problems experienced by individuals with high-functioning autism, and to the development of therapeutic interventions and educational approaches targeted at the specific needs of each sub-type.

Dr O’ Sullivan notes: “Although all of these children experience some problems socialising and communicating with others, they are all different and their strengths and areas of weakness present themselves in different ways which is reflected in their sub-type. For instance some are very chatty and ‘showman like’, others quite anxious and adult dependent, and some children can be quite passive and ‘coast’ along the edges without drawing too much attention to themselves. Those in each sub-type share very particular personality-type traits and physical characteristics which are easily identifiable, and quite unlike those in other sub-types. The identification of these 12 sub-types offers those with AS, their parents, teachers and those in the medical professions with a finely tuned and differentiated way to communicate and interact in the world, as the approach to questions, conversation, eye contact, even things like seating arrangement preferences, will differ depending on which sub-type a person is most closely aligned with. Knowing how best to interact with a person according to his or her sub-type has led to a transformation of our Social Drama sessions and brings out the best in our children and young people as a result”.

Among the international speakers at the Conference will be:

- Prof. Fred Volkmar from Yale University
- Prof. Patricia Howlin from the Institute of Psychiatry, London.
- Dr Stephen Shore, Assistant Professor at Adelphi University, USA who has been diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder

For further details, please go to:

www.challengingdsm5.org

www.tcd.ie/Education

www.aspireireland.ie

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