

## What is the issue?

It is reported that 1 in 100 people in Australia are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There is now an emerging awareness that as the population ages the people who were diagnosed as a child with autism in the 1940's and 1950's, or have been more recently diagnosed as an older adult, are now starting to need additional support.

Until recently, most of the research attention has concentrated on early detection for children. For those who are now aged in their 60's and 70's, and often entering aged care facilities, new and appropriate support options need to be developed.

## What does the research say?

Research in the United Kingdom has estimated that the prevalence for ASD in adults is comparable to the prevalence in childhood (Brugha, et al., 2012). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that there is an estimated 64,600 people in Australia diagnosed with ASD, however, this only includes people up to 30 years of age (ABS, 2011). Generalizing from this data, it could be expected that there are some 60,000 adults, many of those over 55 years of age. If data collected in the United Kingdom (U.K.) by the National Autistic Society can be used as a representation of the Australian community, around 70% of people with ASD over 55 years of age may have only been diagnosed in the last ten years (NAS, 2013).

Not only is the community becoming more aware of the symptoms of ASD in young children and youth, there is also an emerging appreciation that older members of families may similarly be on the autism spectrum, and consequently new ASD screening and diagnosis processes are being investigated for adults of all ages (Coulter, 2009).

## Research in progress

Although there is little clinical research available on the health and support needs of people who are aging with ASD in Australia, some research has begun to emerge overseas.

- The National Autistic Society in the UK. is currently running the Autism in Maturity project which is designed to assess and support people who have ASD and have reached middle or older age.
- Newcastle University (U.K.) and the National Autistic Society have begun to review research into how ageing with ASD affects reasoning and understanding. Researchers are also investigating the impact on carer and relatives, residential needs and advocating for research into more appropriate diagnostic and treatment tools and support services (Mukaetova-Ladinska, 2011).
- Perkins and Berkman (2012) recently reviewed the current literature on the life outcomes of adults with ASD as they age and concluded that there is very little research available that is appropriate or relevant to aging adults since most of the research is done with children and youth. Moreover, the authors identified issues such as mental and physical health, long term accommodation and questions to do with later-life expectations need to be explored.

## In summary

As the ASD community ages, and more of the individuals who have been diagnosed over the last four to five decades reach older age, the community needs to find ways to provide relevant, appropriate and effective support. In the meantime, medical community newsletters are starting to discuss the issues of people with ASD who are aging, and

this may raise the awareness of medical practitioners in the community and influence the way older patients with ASD are supported.

## References

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## Resources

[Autism in Maturity Project](#) - National Autistic Society