



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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World Autism Awareness Day – 02 April

Pretoria: The Department of Health calls on families and communities to support people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) otherwise known as autism in order to thrive and reach their full potential, and not to discriminate them.

Autistic individuals as well as their parents and caregivers often face many challenges, but these do not have to define them because they have the same health needs and rights as the general population. They may in addition, have specific health-care needs related to autism or other co-occurring conditions requiring attention, support, and care.

All people, including those with autism, have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. However, autistic people are often subjected to stigma and discrimination, including unjust deprivation of care, education, and opportunities to engage and participate in their communities.

They have unique physical, social, mental health-care and educational needs as a result of their conditions which require strong collaborative efforts with other government departments such as Basic Education and Social Development for the provision of all-inclusive basket of services for early detection and intervention of ASD to improve their overall health outcomes and lessen long-term suffering and costs of care.

South Africa will on Tuesday, 2 April join the global community to increase awareness about autism, as well as how we can support autistic people in society. The awareness day is used as a platform to empower the public, health and welfare services providers with information and also dispel misconceptions and promote a deeper understanding of autism to help reduce stigma and discrimination through fostering a more inclusive environment for autistic persons and their families.

According to the World Health Organization, about 1 in every 100 children globally has autism. In South Africa, the local studies have found the prevalence of autism to be between 0.08% to 2%. This condition is mainly found to be more prevalent in males than females. Autism can be a life-long condition, but through appropriate and tailored support, children and adults with autism can make significant progress and live fulfilling lives.

The use of standardised ASD screening and diagnostic tools is well-established in high-income countries. Developmental milestones screening is one of the key interventions to early detect disorders like ASDs and intervene early as studies have shown that the median age of diagnosis of these conditions is between 18 to 24 months. In South Africa, the Road to Health Booklet or Clinic Card that issued to all children at birth helps parents to monitor health and development of each child until the age of 5 years. This also assists in early identification and intervention when a child's development is not in line with the expected developmental milestones.

Early diagnosis and intervention of autism can significantly impact the child's development and help families understand their child's strengths and challenges and create a personalised treatment and support plan. Thus, parents are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the educational information contained in the Clinic Card.

Although, there is no cure for autism spectrum disorders, some medications are used to help people with ASD function better by treating co-occurring symptoms such as high energy levels, inability to focus, or self-harming behaviour including head banging or hand biting. Treatment can also help manage co-occurring mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, and physical conditions such as seizures, sleep problems.

If you suspect that you or your family member or child may be having autism spectrum disorder, visit your nearest health care facility or provider for screening and assessment to enable them to provide the necessary interventions, or refer where necessary.

Symptoms and causes of autism may differ from child to child, but some common symptoms include difficulty with social interactions, delayed speech and language skills, repetitive behaviours. Autism is primarily caused by nature (a genetic disorder), but the severity of autism can be influenced by nurture (environmental factors).

Care for people with autism needs to be accompanied by actions at family, community and societal levels for greater accessibility, inclusivity, and support, hence it is important to empower communities including health workers, educators and employers with knowledge and information about the conditions to ensure tolerance, support and acceptance of autistic individuals.

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