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Autism: Unlocking a generation

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Have we been approaching autism all wrong? Picture: Complimentary

By Ruth Walker

Published on **26/05/2013 00:00**

It has been surrounded by controversy for years, but have we been approaching autism all wrong, asks Ruth Walker

GOOD food, exercise and a great night's sleep. What if treating conditions like [autism](#) was that simple? Of course, any parent of an autistic child will know how difficult it is to get them to eat a varied, healthy diet – an exclusive regime of Pop Tarts and Coke is not particularly unusual (one autistic child was recently admitted to hospital in the US with scurvy for that very reason). But, with the recent news that the number of children in Scottish schools with conditions such as autism, ADHD and learning difficulties has increased fourfold, it's clear something needs to be done before it becomes an epidemic.

Dr Martha Herbert of Harvard Medical School, an acknowledged [autism expert](#) and author of *The Autism Revolution*, believes the accepted approach has been all wrong from the start. "Autism is a treatable, whole-body condition that has been miscategorised as a lifelong, genetically caused, psychiatric condition," she says.

Herbert, who will be speaking at an autism conference in Edinburgh next month, continues, "For

many years people assumed that if you have a neuro-psychiatric disorder it's some kind of a brain defect that's stamped in from conception by genetic programme – it's assumed the brain is broken. But we're finding out, especially now in the age of iPads and keyboards, that a lot of people who can't talk are typing their brains out. They're writing books, they're making movies, they're communicating over the internet and they're testing out their IQs. Some have IQs of 180.”

The [cause of autism](#) has been debated long and hard – and that debate continues – but Herbert believes at the root of the condition is something called calcium channels, which are key to the way the brain communicates with everything else in our bodies. A breakdown in calcium channels can be caused by genetics or toxins or both.

And, to be clear, she defines toxins as “the accumulation of all the stuff we've been exposed to that piles up in our bodies or that drags down our systems. There are so many things in the air and in the food we eat and in the water supply. All of these exposures wear down the cellular function.”

Nor has this toxic cocktail only resulted in a massive increase in autism. Diabetes, obesity, heart disease, cancer – all are in a similar category, according to Herbert. “The information we find in those conditions is very similar in autism. In fact, somebody calls autism diabetes of the brain.”

The publicity surrounding the MMR vaccine, which many believed caused autism, has only served to confuse matters, she says. “The whole thing has been held back by this crazy vaccine controversy which made everybody afraid. Let's just let it go and look at the kids. They need medical help.”

One of the main medical issues at stake is what she calls “nutrient sweating”. “These kids are so depleted, they don't absorb food very well. We need to get them built up again, getting the gut microflora sorted – many have had multiple courses of antibiotics. That needs to be replenished and you can do that with fermented foods. Probiotics work but they don't work as well as fermented foods.” Fermented foods include miso, pickles, Marmite, yoghurt and some cheeses.

“A lot of them tend to be very picky eaters,” continues Herbert. “They don't eat the right things and then when they do they don't absorb even the minimal amount of nutrients. It takes a lot of work to get these kids to eat their food.

“I've been doing some consultancy work with a large residential facility in upstate New York, on a biodynamic, organic farm. The kids go there and they're eating terribly, but within a few months they're sitting eating plates of broccoli and loving it, and they start getting much better, stop being violent and start relating to each other.”

Once a good diet is established, they can work on establishing a good sleeping pattern.

“Their sleep is terribly disregulated and it's very important to get that regulated. Regular, daily food, exercise, all these are really elementary things that don't require another 40 years of expensive scientific research. But these things have been neglected in autism.”

It all sounds so simple. So why is getting the right kind of help still so difficult for families affected by autism?

“There's a skillset here that people don't learn in conventional medical training,” says Herbert, “so it sounds like alternative medicine and people don't want to hear about it. But it is becoming more acceptable.

“I hope to be part of a change so that every doctor learns how to do this because it is not just about autism; every patient with diabetes, every patient with high blood pressure could benefit from it. There are a number of practitioners who have been using this type of approach in mothers before they get pregnant. You would predict that a certain number of them, especially the high risk ones, would have babies with autism but they don't.”

Those high-risk mothers, she says, are women who might eat a lot of junk food or drink a lot of cola. Perhaps they did work on their home while pregnant, sanding floors and painting walls, using a lot of chemical products. “They're exposing themselves at a very vulnerable time and it doesn't even occur to them it might be a problem.”

“Then when the baby’s born it may have diarrhoea and colic and the doctor may say it’s OK when it isn’t because it’s already showing that the immune system is taking a beating,” she says.

So, with research continuing, does she see a time when we can perhaps eradicate autism all together?

“Yes,” she says instantly. “Not necessarily 100 per cent, but for the vast majority. I think most people have no genetic vulnerability, or that the genetic vulnerability isn’t strong enough to go very far when you take away the environmental triggers.”

Twitter: [@Ruth_Lesley](#)

Dr Martha Herbert will be speaking at the Changing the Course of Autism conference in the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, 12 and 13 June (www.autismtreatmenttrust.org). The Autism Revolution is published by Ballantine Books, £9.89 (www.autismrevolution.org)

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