

## CLINICAL SKILLS: EXPLAINING AUTISM

*Example OSCE station: you are a junior doctor on placement in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) clinic. You are asked to see a 9 year-old boy who has been referred to the psychiatric clinic who has been diagnosed with autism. Please speak to his mother about a diagnosis and answer any questions she may have.*

- **Wash hands**
- **Introduce self**
- **Ask permission to speak to mother**
- **Establish mother's agenda**
- **Establish your own agenda**
- **Emphasise that she is free to ask any questions as you talk**

### **What is autism?**

- Autism is a group of disorders which affect the development of the brain, leading to a failure for children to develop normal methods of communicating with other people
- There is a wide spectrum of severity, with some children able to function with very close to normal communication abilities, and other children not able to communicate with other people at all
- It occurs in around 1 in every 2000 children
- It occurs more commonly in males (4:1)
- It normally commences before the age of 3
- Development of the child may seem the same as other children their age at first, but then he either stops developing, or his development slows down compared to other children
- The main features of autism include;
  - The child is compelled to perform repetitive tasks and has their own 'rituals' of how they carry out tasks
  - The child dislikes change
  - The child has impaired communication and social interaction skills. The child is emotionally detached
  - Often speech develops later in life, and communication often remains impaired
  - The child may also have a learning disabilities (1/3rd), but this is not always the case
  - 1 in every 4 may go on to develop epilepsy

### **What is the cause of autism?**

- The cause is not known. There are various theories, and various genetic and environmental factors may be involved. There is no reliable or supported evidence that shows any link between the 'Measles, Mumps and Rubella' (MMR) vaccination and autism

**How do you treat autism?**

- Most children with autism are under the care of a specialist in child psychiatry.
- Autism is mainly treated behaviourally, aiming to reduce unhelpful behaviours and promote use of good communication skills
- Special education to help with language and communication skills
- Support and education for the family is very important
- There is a large role for speech and language therapy
- Occupational therapy can help the child and family adapt to their difficulties
- Medication is rarely used, but sometimes may be needed to help control outbursts of excitement or aggression.
- There is no 'cure' for autism. The specialist education and support aim to maximise the potential of each child as they grow into adults. It is thought that the earlier the specialist input is started, the better the outcome

**Is he ever going to change?**

- Autism continues for life. As the severity can vary, it is difficult to predict the outcome for each child. Even without treatment, sometimes there is improvement in the teenage years and some people with autism become more sociable. Some adults with autism manage to work and get by with just a little support. Many need more support and live at home with parents or family. A placement in a residential home may be needed when older if the child required ongoing care

**To conclude the consultation:**

- Ask if there are any more questions (ensure you actually leave time for this)
- Thank mother and provide with written information and contact details of the support team.