

## **Diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorders: My Approach**

**By, Judith Aronson-Ramos, M.D.**

Recently released statistics from the Center for Disease Control, place the incidence of autism spectrum disorders as roughly 1/80 children. Debate continues regarding the cause for the rising numbers, broadening of the spectrum, and consistency of diagnosis among medical professionals. Some facts which have become well accepted include the following:

- The definition of what constitutes Autism Spectrum Disorder now includes the spectrum of disorders ranging from classic or infantile autism, PDD-NOS, to Asperger's Syndrome.
- Early intervention consisting of diagnosis and treatment as young as possible improves overall outcome.
- ASD as a "spectrum disorder" means children have a wide range of impairing symptoms from very mild to severe.
- Outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorders are variable with some children doing so well they actually lose the diagnosis.

Knowing this information what is a parent to do if they recognize the symptoms of autism in their child? What is the first step if your child is given the diagnosis? What happens if you think your child has the disorder and the medical specialists don't?

At the present time some researchers believe we can confidently make the diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder as young as 9 months to one year. These are generally researchers at universities working with multidisciplinary teams of professionals. However, in the community at large some professionals feel a diagnosis can be made at 12-18 months of age, others won't make the diagnosis of an autistic spectrum disorder until two - four years of age. There are formal tools clinicians can use to help them make a diagnosis as young as 12 months of age.

Rather than emphasizing the diagnosis, there are more relevant questions: Is the child developing typically in the areas of language, social interaction, and behavior? What are the most appropriate treatments, therapies, and programs available? Where the child should be enrolled in school? Should any specific medical tests be done? Are there dietary or nutritional concerns? Should there be changes in the child's daily routine? Is medication appropriate?

In my clinical practice each and every evaluation is approached in a treatment oriented and family focused manner. Whether the child has autism or another disorder of development the focus is always on practical treatment planning and intensive monitoring of progress. The goal is to optimize the potential of each child, and day to day lives of every family.