

Autism from the perspective of the Healthcare Provider

As part of our focus on Autism and Physical Wellbeing, I spoke to Ruth-Ann Welsh who is a Mental Health and Wellbeing Nurse with the South Perthshire Community Mental Health Team.

I was keen to hear directly from a primary health care practitioner about the challenges they face in providing good care to autistic patients.

Ruth has a background in working with autism and learning disabilities and was conscious that she had more insight into the needs of autistic people than many of her colleagues but commented that she would also benefit from access to more training and resources.

Ruth commented on the challenges in meeting the sensory needs of autistic patients and how unique they can be. It is reliant on the healthcare professions knowing how best to respond to these in advance. There are some basic good practice strategies such as avoiding a very cluttered environment, managing the appointment room/waiting area and sensitivity to noise in the appointment room but nothing is better than the healthcare professional knowing in advance what might be needed for the individual. Although most of Ruth's work continues to be face to face, supporting people remotely has worked well for some but not others.

Where things go well for an autistic patient (and the right adaptations (if needed) have been made it is often because of the healthcare practitioner has either an interest (personal or professional) and has access to training or information. In this sense sometimes it can be just a question of luck. Changes

in healthcare staff are often unavoidable but can pose another challenge and wherever possible, more consistency of staff would be helpful.

Access to information about autism can be a challenge. Firstly, for healthcare professionals to find the time but then also where to go, what to read/watch given limited time. A clearer pathway to the right information at the right level would be a huge help for many.

Ruth also commented about information about and diagnosis for autistic women was an issue that she has become increasingly aware of.

I was encouraged by Ruth's comments that if we get it right for autistic patients then we are getting it right for many others. Things like clear communication, consistency of service and taking an individual approach are all just good practice not specifically good autism practice.

Finally it was good to hear about the challenges from the perspective of the healthcare provider. Whilst autistic people still experience challenges in accessing good healthcare it is encouraging to hear a shared understanding of those issues and a desire to get it right for each autistic patient.



Richard Ibbotson, Director – Autism Network Scotland