Autism Awareness

Learning to better understand autism spectrum disorder

The understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is coming into the light. The science is advancing and with increased understanding, there is hope that earlier identification, intervention and evidence-based services will follow.

The promising research not only comes as encouraging news—it is also a testament of the dedication of Autism Speaks Canada (ASC), an affiliate organization of Autism Speaks (AS), the world's largest autism science and advocacy organization. ASC has also contributed $2.5-million to the project to date, with a goal of $25-million for the project worldwide, including $10-million in Canada.

The most important progress to date, according to ASC executive director Jill Farber, is that “we know it’s important to get evidence-based services will follow. As important as early detection is, we also have to remember that families affected by ASD.

A large part of the awareness came from research. Our group and others have shown that autism, a behavioural disorder, can have a biological basis—as genes can be involved,” he says. “This is general breaking, once we can use the genetic information to facilitate more accurate clinical diagnosis and sometimes for early identification, which is critical for optimal outcomes.”

Dr. Stephen Scherer is now leading the integration between Google and Autism Speaks—aiming to reduce and share through open science the world’s largest genomic database on autism. In its biggest fundraising campaign to date, Autism Speaks seeks to raise $25-million for the project worldwide, including $10-million in Canada.

“This is the biggest whole-genome sequencing project in the world and the only one I know of that is making the data available via an open-access format,” he says. “This is the most exciting project, since we are working with Google to enhance services while transforming the role of genetics in autism.”

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As autism Speaks Canada recognizes the importance of collaboration,” explains ASC executive director Jill Farber. “Along with our partners, we help to disseminate information about autism spectrum and along the lifespan. The organization and its partners, including the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA), work collaboratively to identify and address the needs of the ASD community across the country.

As important as early detection is, we also have to remember that individuals with autism grow up,” Farber says. “We have to address needs along the lifespan and across the country, to raising public awareness about autism and to building a larger autism leadership community through advocacy efforts.

Autism Speaks (AS), along with Autism Speaks Canada (ASC), is the world’s leading autism science and advocacy organization and has invested over $200-million into scientific research. ASC is committed to building the capacity for research and services across the country, to raising public awareness about autism and to building a larger autism leadership community through advocacy efforts.

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Autism Speaks Canada is committed to raising the funds necessary to improve lives today and transform lives tomorrow across the autism spectrum and along the lifespan.

ASC and ASC have committed $25-million to Canadian research. Since 2008, when the ASC Family Services Community Grants program began, ASC has contributed $25-million to organizations across Canada to increase their capacity to support individuals and families impacted by autism spectrum disorder.

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For details, visit: Cineplex.com/SensoryFriendly
Improving opportunities for adults with ASD is one of the key areas of focus for Autism Speaks Canada. In an effort to make movie-going accessible to as many Canadians as possible, we’re offering tickets to the screening and keep it as affordable as we can for families with the children with the autism spectrum who attend.

The first day of the Sensory Friendly Screenings, says Marshall, who mentions Star on Strollers, a one-day-a-month initiative that provides a nearby calm zone where families can take a break from the screening. She adds that the availability of technology also allows enhanced access, such as closed captioning. "We’ve had positive feedback from those who have participated in over 136 countries. A corporation that has been supporting Light It Up Blue – Autism Speaks’ global awareness initiative since 2005 is Home Depot. With autism spectrum disorder prevalence increasing dramatically, adults with autism will make up an increasingly large proportion of the population in the future, says Stellato. If research and therapeutic support is funded now, he says, "The return on investment will be a much greater impact on all of us.

For many, a visit to the movie theatre is a treat they look forward to, but for individuals impacted by autism spectrum disorder and their families, this kind of outing can present a unique set of challenges. A new program entitled Sensory Friendly Screenings, developed in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, aims to make going-into theaters more accessible to as many Canadians as possible, says Pat Marshall, vice-president of communications and development at Cineplex Entertainment. She explains that Sensory Friendly Screenings are designed to make movie-going accessible to as many Canadians as possible. "It was important for us to seek input on the program and find out how individuals on the autism spectrum, their families and us can make a difference and help make the program a success in helping the entire ASD community."

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BY SEQUENCING THE DNA OF OVER 10,000 FAMILIES AFFECTED BY AUTISM, MSSNG WILL ANSWER THE MANY QUESTIONS WE STILL HAVE ABOUT AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER.

This vast sea of information will be made accessible, for free, to researchers everywhere. The greatest minds in science from around the world will be able to study trillions of data points in one single database. Our pilot program of 1,000 whole genomes has led to new discoveries about the disorder. With over 10,000 whole genomes and the help of the global science community, we can far outweigh what has been accomplished so far. MSSNG will identify many subtypes of autism, which may lead to more personalized and more accurate treatments.

Thank you, Steven Wise & Susan Zikman Wise, Co-Chairs of the MSSNG project Fundraising Campaign, for your commitment, inspiration and leadership.

Learn more at www.mss.ng and www.autismspeaks.ca