

Report by:

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As a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Queen's University I have many interests in research related to autism spectrum disorders (ASD), both how it relates to my own research and my clinical work. I was very excited to attend IMFAR in Chicago this year and was honoured to have received support from Autism Ontario which made it more feasible for me to attend the conference. I was pleased to have the opportunity to hear about some of the newest findings in many disciplines.

I took the opportunity to learn about some areas of research which I am not that familiar. In particular, I attended a series of lectures on Epidemiology, during which I learned about several studies investigating risk of ASD based on the age of parents, maternal use of beta 2 agonists and folic acid early in pregnancy. I also learned that the age of diagnosis is decreasing in the United States, although there is great variability across states.

I also attended a series of talks about the relationship between the immune system, brain and behaviour and was particularly excited by some promising preliminary findings presented by Dr. Amaral. This research group has isolated a specific antibody that has been found in a subset of mothers of children with ASD. The antibody was given to a small group of pregnant rhesus monkeys and their offspring were monitored for differences in behaviour, as compared to monkeys who had not received the antibody. The researchers found some very specific repetitive behaviours in the monkeys

who had received the antibody in utero. They are planning to replicate this study with a larger group of monkeys; however, the findings to this point are very promising and indicative of the importance of understanding immune functioning in families of children with ASD.

I was also able to attend some presentations that focused on issues that will be more relevant to my clinical work in assessing and treating children with ASD. I attended a series focusing on disorders and difficulties that tend to co-occur with ASD. I learned that some work has found that as many as 70% of children with ASD will also have another psychiatric diagnosis, most commonly ADHD. In a separate talk, discussing the treatment of ADHD symptoms in children with ASD I learned that the medications that are often prescribed for ADHD in typically developing children do not work as well in children with ASD.

My own research focuses on the experiences of parents of children with ASD and particularly on the differences between parents who use parent support groups and those who do not. I was able to present some preliminary findings in a poster at IMFAR and was excited to speak to both researchers and family members who were interested in my work. I am still looking for participants and will be offering an online parent support group as part of my study, and I invite you to get more information at <https://sites.google.com/site/ASDParentSupportGroupStudy>