



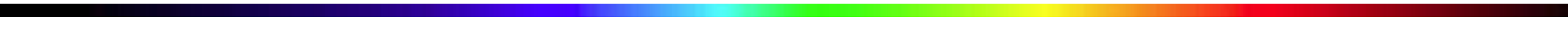
# **Autistic Doctors Not an Oxymoron**

**Dr Shirley Moore  
Dr Mary Doherty**

# Autism in Doctors

*“It should be noted that it is unlikely that someone with severe autism would enter medical school, but it is possible for someone with Asperger’s syndrome (highly performing autism) to qualify in medicine or dentistry.”*

Health Education England

- It exists
  - It matters
  - It is being missed
  - What it looks like / how to recognise it
  - Asset vs deficit
- 



## Pervasive Developmental Disorders (Autism)

- Social impairment
- Communication impairment
- Restricted and repetitive activities and interests
- Early onset
- 2/1000 (0.5/1000 with autism)
- male: female ~~3:1~~ 4:1
- 50% IQ  $\leq$  50, 70%  $<$  70 and  $<$  100% (95%)  $<$  100

# Autism


- Social interaction
  - Social communication
  - Restricted interests
  - Repetitive behaviours
- 
- Sensory issues
  - Executive dysfunction
  - Over inclusiveness

Foundation Id : <http://id.who.int/icd/entity/437815624>

## 6A02 Autism spectrum disorder

### Parent

Neurodevelopmental disorders


Show all ancestors 

### Description

Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests. The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they may vary according to social, educational, or other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities.

. . .

# Case Study

- 41 year-old ♀ StR in anaesthesia
  - Mature student. B.Eng, M.Sc.
  - MBChB with honours, prizes. FY1/2
  - Core training in anaesthesia – 7 years
  - Maternity leave & sick leave
  - Difficult training – little support
  - Dx of Asperger Syndrome made
  - Dismissal/ill health retirement
- 

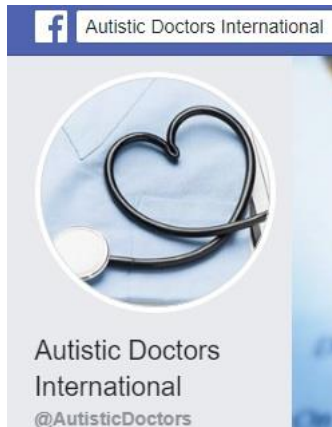
# Autism in Doctors

- Not new
- Why now?



## 'Fixing people is easy but life is a mystery', says autistic surgeon

When Vaughan Bowen was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, his debilitating social anxiety was suddenly explained.

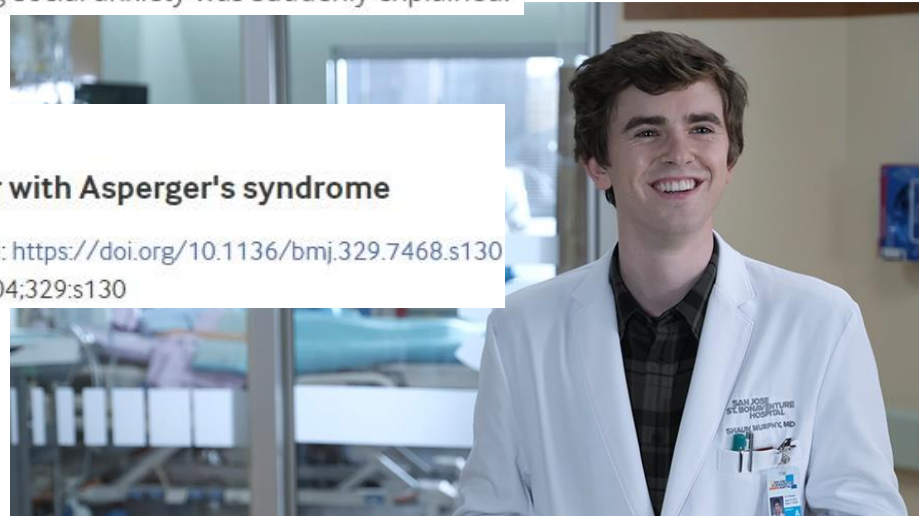


### Career Focus


#### Life as a doctor with Asperger's syndrome

BMJ 2004 ; 329 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7468.s130>

Cite this as: BMJ 2004;329:s130



# Recognising autism in doctors

- Socially awkward, lack of reciprocity
  - Perfectionistic, hypercritical
    - Poor tolerance for criticism from others
  - Executive function difficulties
    - Delegating, prioritising, multitasking, timekeeping
  - Mismatch between paper and practice
    - Underconfident, anxious
    - Unexpected exam failure
      - Oral, practical
  - Inflexible
  - Informal complaints
  - Periods of longterm sick leave with mental health difficulties
- 





[Edit profile](#)

## The Autistic Doctor

@AutisticDoctor

Medical Doctor. Mother. Autistic. Interest in Mountain Medicine & Mental Health.  
Passionate about [#Autism](#). [#ActuallyAutistic](#) [#AutisticDoctor](#) [#AutisticHealth](#)

[facebook.com/AutisticDoctor...](#)  Joined September 2018

1,391 Following   1,349 Followers





**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor

Replying to @wield1

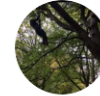
Yep. [#Andme](#)

Severe depression, suicidal. Diagnosed autistic - Aha!!!

That explained everything!

Doing great now, loving life, loving work, and I'm enjoying connecting other autistic doctors together.

10:20 AM · Apr 25, 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)



**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor

I love my job. Really looking forward to work tomorrow.

It's SO much easier to manage now I know I'm  
[#actuallyautistic](#) [#medtwitter](#)

10:05 PM · Feb 24, 2019 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

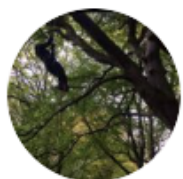


**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor

At least I understand the dynamics of what's happening now. Before I knew I was autistic I'd have been so uncomfortable in this situation.

I'm so glad I know I'm [#ActuallyAutistic](#)!

1:26 PM · Mar 6, 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)



**The Autistic Doctor**

@AutisticDoctor



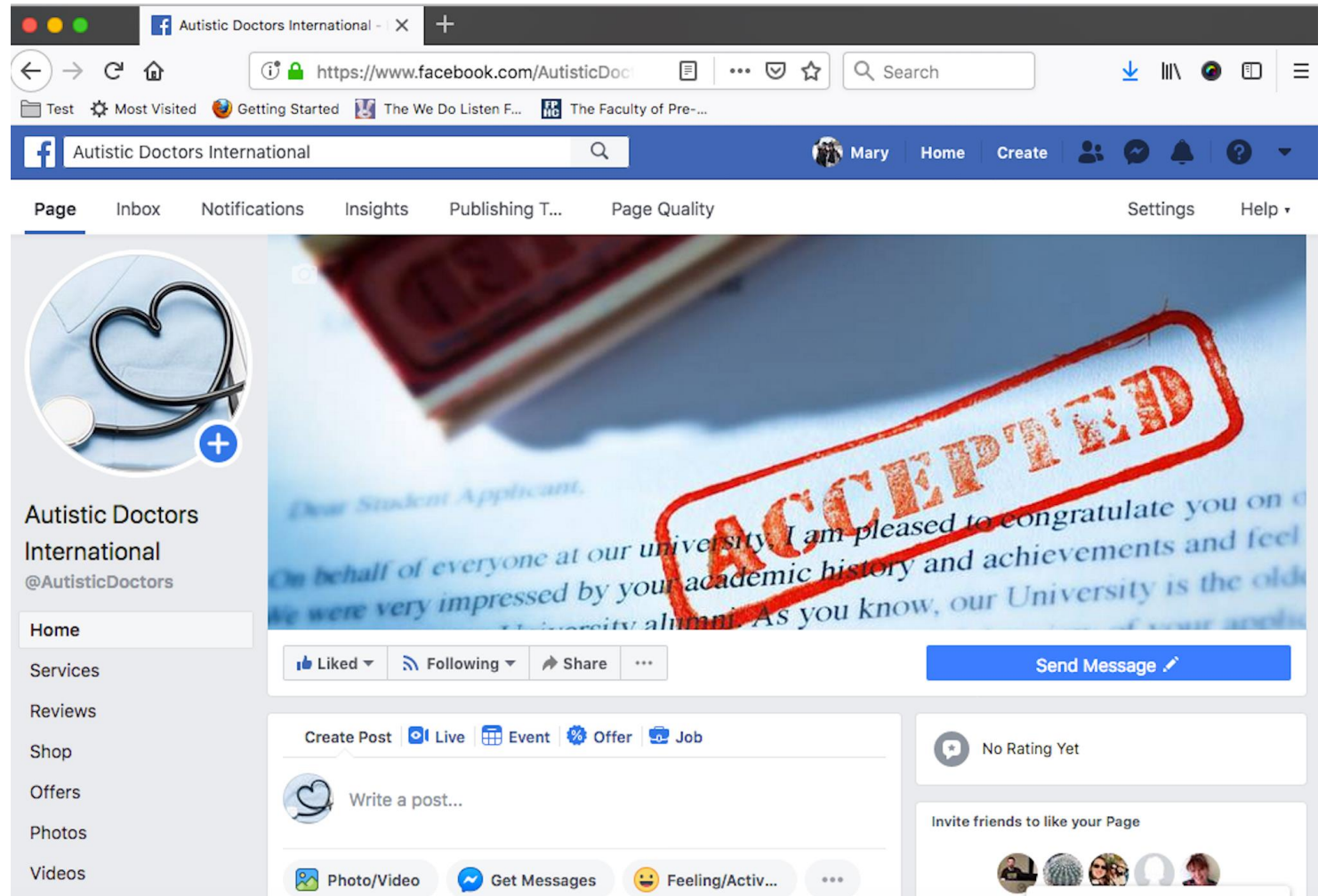
Medicine selects for Aspie traits. Lots of us actually meet the criteria for diagnosis. All is good until demands exceed capacity to cope, then the wheels fall off. ASD should be specifically considered when doctors present in difficulty.

[@aspiedoc1](#) [@Psychautismcham](#)

6:47 PM · Feb 27, 2019 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

# Prevalence

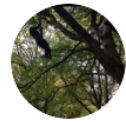
- 1 in 65 to 1 in 28
- GPs 1%
- GMC FTP 18 cases
- Autistic Doctors International 30
- Expect at least 1-2%





# Consequences of undiagnosed autism

- Personal distress
- Professional difficulties
- Career progression
- Change of career
- Stress leave
- Early retirement
- Physical & mental health
- Early mortality



**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor


Replying to [@ahmedhankir](#)

Same. Recognising that my mental health issues related to undiagnosed autism was the key for me. It's easy to stay well now that I understand. Look out for autism, there's lots of us undiagnosed in the MH services.

7:44 AM · Nov 18, 2018 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

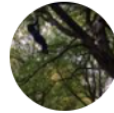
||| [View Tweet activity](#)

# Mental Health

- Mental ill health up to 80%
  - Excess mortality
  - Suicide – an autistic crisis
    - 66% ideation
    - 35% attempted
    - 15% of hospitalized
    - 11% of completed suicides
  - It masquerades as...
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Bipolar Disorder
  - OCD
  - Eating Disorder
  - Substance abuse
  - Personality Disorder \*BPD\*
  - ADHD/Dyslexia/Dyspraxia
- 

# Benefit of Diagnosis

- Not broken normal
- Self awareness
- Social challenges
- Sensory challenges
- Community support
- Reasonable adjustments



**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor

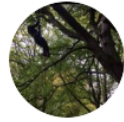
Replying to @dwoodhouse1 @NHSAbility and 4 others

Awareness of existing autistic staff as well as encouragement of diversity & inclusion in recruitment is just emerging.

Expect at least 1%. Support aids retention in a group at high risk for burnout & early exit.

11:16 PM - 10 Apr 2019





**The Autistic Doctor**  
@AutisticDoctor



My work colleagues have absolutely no idea the amount of effort it takes for me to act like part of the team.

[#TotallyExhausted](#)

5:14 PM · Mar 5, 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)





# Autism: the positives



Understanding, embracing and celebrating different ways of thinking and doing can release the true power of the autistic mind. Here we look at the positive features of autism.



## Attention to detail

- Thoroughness
- Accuracy



## Methodical approach

- Analytical
- Spotting patterns, repetition



## Deep focus

- Concentration
- Freedom from distraction



## Novel approaches

- Unique thought processes
- Innovative solutions



## Observational skills

- Listen, look, learn approach
- Fact finding



## Creativity

- Distinctive imagination
- Expression of ideas



## Absorb and retain facts

- Excellent long term memory
- Superior recall



## Tenacity and resilience

- Determination
- Challenge opinions



## Visual skills

- Visual learning and recall
- Detail-focused



## Accepting of difference

- Less likely to judge others
- May question norms



## Expertise

- In-depth knowledge
- High level of skills



## Integrity

- Honesty, loyalty
- Commitment

## ! Remember

**Every** experience of autism is **unique**. **No one person** will identify with **every positive feature of autism**. We all have **individual** skills, attributes and characteristics that are as unique as our personalities – this is the **power of neurodiversity**.

Harriet Cannon  
Disability Services, February 2018



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



# What to look out for?

## AQ-10 Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ)

A quick referral guide for adults with suspected autism who do not have a learning disability.

Please tick one option per question only:

		Definitely Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Definitely Disagree
1	I often notice small sounds when others do not				
2	I usually concentrate more on the whole picture, rather than the small details				
3	I find it easy to do more than one thing at once				
4	If there is an interruption, I can switch back to what I was doing very quickly				
5	I find it easy to 'read between the lines' when someone is talking to me				
6	I know how to tell if someone listening to me is getting bored				
7	When I'm reading a story I find it difficult to work out the characters' intentions				
8	I like to collect information about categories of things (e.g. types of car, types of bird, types of train, types of plant etc)				
9	I find it easy to work out what someone is thinking or feeling just by looking at their face				
10	I find it difficult to work out people's intentions				

**SCORING:** Only 1 point can be scored for each question. Score 1 point for *Definitely* or *Slightly Agree* on each of items 1, 7, 8, and 10. Score 1 point for *Definitely* or *Slightly Disagree* on each of items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9. If the individual scores **more than 6 out of 10**, consider referring them for a specialist diagnostic assessment.

This test is recommended in 'Autism: recognition, referral, diagnosis and management of adults on the autism spectrum' (NICE clinical guideline CG142). [www.nice.org.uk/CG142](http://www.nice.org.uk/CG142)

**Key reference:** Allison C, Auyeung B, and Baron-Cohen S, (2012) *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 51(2):202-12.

- 10 item questionnaire
- Nice guidelines
- A screening tool
- Refer for assessment if > 6

- [https://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc\\_tests](https://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc_tests)

# Conclusion

- Beware knowledge gap
- Think beyond stereotypes
- Heterogenous presentation
- Specialist advice



- Add autism to differential diagnosis
- Recognise and build on the benefits of autism
- Resist tragedy narrative

# Contacts



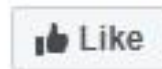
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[drmdoherty@gmail.com](mailto:drmdoherty@gmail.com)  
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**Autistic Doctors International**

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A page to connect autistic medical doctors worldwide. Message us here to join the secret group for friendship and peer support.