

## PROGRAM 3: PROJECT 3.013

# MANAGEMENT OF MENTAL ILL HEALTH IN ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

JOURNAL: AUSTRALIAN FAMILY PHYSICIAN – NOVEMBER 2015

## PROJECT AIM

*To describe what is known about mental ill health in adults with autism and identify specific considerations for general practitioners' (GPs) assessment and management.*

## WHO WERE THE RESEARCHERS?

**Kitty-Rose Foley** <sup>1,2</sup>

**Julian Trollor** <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Developmental Disability, Neuropsychiatry, School of Psychiatry, UNSW Australia, Sydney, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC), Long Pocket, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

## WHAT DID WE DO?

Review of the literature and relevant resources.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Mental ill health in adults on the spectrum is more common than in the general population**

Mental ill health in adults on the autism spectrum is common but research shows different rates of illness depending on how the studies are undertaken (eg. where the researchers find their participants hospital, clinic or large databases).

Accurate figures are also hard to work out because of difficulties distinguishing symptoms of mental ill health from autism symptoms and due to limited communication skills (including explaining their emotions).

Anxiety occurs in about 30 to 50% of adults with autism, depression in up to 50%, and schizophrenia up to 10%. Mental ill health is very common in those with severe intellectual disability and autism.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **GPs have a key role in identifying and managing mental ill health in adults on the spectrum**

GPs are often the first line of contact with the healthcare system for people on the autism spectrum, and provide the gateway to specialised mental health services. They need to be equipped with the appropriate tools and resources to identify common mental health disorders in adults on the spectrum.



## SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR GPs

### Valuing neurodiversity

The terms used to describe autism and the approach to treatment and therapy are influenced by a patient's sense of identity. Acknowledgment of the individual's preferences and self-identity are key to a good GP-patient relationship.

### Communication

Allow extra time during appointments, use brief and concrete language and provide written as well as verbal information.

### Physical health

When an adult is sick, they may be more vulnerable to some mental health disorders.

### Challenging behaviour

Thorough assessment of what is causing a challenging behaviour is very important. Challenging behaviours can be triggered by new or worsened mental health disorders, changes in sensory processing, pain and being sick.

### The importance of the environment

Consider the impact of the sensory environment such as lighting, visual distractions, auditory distractions, comfort and feel of chair, use of

tactile and/or weighted items to help the adult keep calm and focused.

### The carer role and experience

Carers can provide useful information to help GPs to recognise behaviours, diet changes, communication and can help provide a detailed medical history when the adult on the spectrum has limited communication.

### Medications

There is limited study of the effectiveness of medications which affect mental activity, behaviour or mood in adults on the spectrum, but it is generally thought that medications have the same potential to help people with mental ill health regardless of whether they have autism or not.

Medications used to treat mental ill health can have both good and bad effects on health. These effects should be discussed before medications are prescribed. GPs can provide advice and monitor the safety of medications, and help prevent or manage side effects. The need for medications should be checked and discussed regularly, and medications that are no longer required should be withdrawn under supervision.

## FIND OUT MORE

### The Australian Longitudinal Study of Adults with Autism (ALSAA)

Professor Julian Trollor *and* Dr Kitty-Rose Foley

Web: [3dn.unsw.edu.au](http://3dn.unsw.edu.au) | Web: [autismcrc.com.au/ALSAA](http://autismcrc.com.au/ALSAA) | Email: [autismcrc@unsw.edu.au](mailto:autismcrc@unsw.edu.au)