



Department  
of Health

**PE1597/C**

Ned Sharratt  
Assistant Clerk  
Public Petitions Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
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Dear Ned

**Consideration of Petition PE1597 (Mycoplasma Fermentans in Regressive Autism)**

Thank you for your letter of 27 January in which you ask if the Department of Health has commissioned any research into the apparent increased incidence of Autism in the UK or whether we are aware of such research taking place independently. I am responding to you as the Policy Lead for Autism in Adults in the Department of Health.

Recent estimates by the Health and Social Care Information Centre suggest that around one in a hundred people in England (over 500,000 people in total) have autism. Until 2009 - 11 all research on the prevalence of autism was based on studies of samples of children and measurement and sampling methods were not uniform. Therefore results could not be confidently compared. As recognition of autism grew this was sometimes interpreted as a rate increase.

In 2007 autism was added to the third survey of adult and elderly people, aged 16 upwards, sampled throughout England in the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey programme (APMS, 1993, 2000, 2007). The 2007 data can be accessed at :  
<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/pubs/psychiatricmorbidity07>

Rates of autism did not differ significantly across all age groups up to and including people in their eighties. This suggests that similar numbers of children were developing autism 80 years ago, before autism was known about, as are now. Additional survey work in English population register samples of intellectually disabled adults found a small and statistically significant decline in autism rates with increasing age, which could be due to earlier mortality that is well recognised in this population.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) supports a broad portfolio of research relating to autism including research into causes, characteristics, diagnosis and treatment. Current MRC projects include research at the University of Reading on reward and empathy in autism, and research at King's College London which aims to identify the reasons why

certain genetic mutations can cause problems during brain development. As well as research projects addressing specific aspects of autism, the MRC supports resources and facilities that can be accessed by researchers working in this field. One example is the Autism Brain Bank which is supported by the MRC via the Oxford Brain Bank. The Bank is a UK-wide collection of brains for autism and related developmental disorders.

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) also funds autism research. The NIHR Biomedical Research Centre for Mental Health has a £2.5million, five-year research theme on neurodevelopmental disorders. This is focussed mainly on autism spectrum conditions and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and aims to enable more rapid diagnosis and improve treatment of individuals.

Yours sincerely

Michael Swaffield  
Autism in Adults Policy Lead