

Little help for children with autism

Still faced with 'ghastly stigma'

LYSE COMINS

THEY are chained to beds, locked indoors while their parents go to work, beaten and abused. They are the subjects of ridicule and attempted exorcism.

These are vulnerable children with autism who, according to Jill Stacey, national director of Autism South Africa, are still faced with a "ghastly stigma" because of a lack of knowledge about the developmental disorder.

Stacey was in Durban yesterday to address a conference on "Autism and Developmental Disabilities: The South African Context", hosted by the University of KZN's College of Health Sciences and global advocacy group Autism Speaks.

The conference was attended by international experts, health care practitioners such as psychiatrists, pediatricians, occupational therapists and academics.

Stacey said there were no national statistics on how many children were autistic. However, research involving more than 200 schools for pupils with specific education needs had shown that very few children with autism were receiving the education and treatment they needed. Less than 11 percent were in any form of education, she said.

Autism is a physical disorder where brain development, structure and functioning is altered.

"Public awareness is getting better - 20 years ago people did



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not know the word autism. Now they know the word but don't understand the ramifications and complexities," Stacey said.

However, the condition still had a "ghastly stigma", particularly in rural areas, and people also tended to ridicule parents who struggled in public with a child.

"We have had horrific stories of children being tied up, tied to beds and trees and sometimes their parents go to work and just leave their child at home and lock them in," Stacey said.

"They tie them up because they believe they are possessed, pour chlorine and bleach down their throats or beat them up to make the demon go away."

Stacey said there was a need for public awareness of the positive contributions people with autism can make.

"They have great attention to detail. They don't see the forest, they see the trees and are very good at research, in IT and inventions," Stacey said.

She said United States statis-

tics on autism prevalence were adapted for South Africa, which indicated that one child with autism was born here every hour.

Mike Rosanoff, from the public health research and scientific review for Autism Speaks, said there was a lack of public and professional awareness and a lack of training and expertise, which led to stigma and children not obtaining health and educational services. He said the organisation hoped to help South Africa to develop a programme to help families affected by autism.

Professor Ezra Susser, of the Mailman School of Public Health at the University of Columbia and New York State Psychiatric Institute, said the rise in autism could be attributed to increased awareness and diagnosis or because of a change in the environment.

Professor Lesley Bamford, an adviser to Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi, said South Africa did not have adequate services for children with developmental disabilities. "There are parts of the country where services are almost non-existent and even where there are services their quality leaves much to be desired," Bamford said. "We have few resources that need to go far."

Dr Marie-Louise Samuels, acting chief director for curriculum implementation and monitoring in the Department of Basic Education, said only four provinces had 711 children in a total of four schools for autistic children.

