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Autism research will be coordinated at Montclair State University

Montclair residents living with autism will be among the first to experience the benefits from seven grants, totaling \$4.5 million, recently funded by the Governor's Council for Medical Research and Treatment of Autism, a division of the state Department of Health. The projects were funded by a grant program known as the New Jersey Autism Center of Excellence.

That program also funds the Coordinating Center at Montclair State University, which will oversee the research across the different sites.

Kaitlin Mulcahy, associate director of the Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health on the MSU campus, and a member of the Coordinating Center, told The Times that the information gleaned from the studies will quickly trickle down to Montclair families.

Staff at the Coordinating Center include faculty with expertise in computer science, biostatistics, autism spectrum disorder clinical treatment, and research and evaluation, said Mulcahy. As the head of the Coordinating Center, Gerard Costa, director of the Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health, will be principally responsible for encouraging collaboration among the research sites, Mulcahy said.

During a press conference at the Ben Samuels Children's Center at MSU on Thursday, June 27, state Commissioner of Health Mary O'Dowd said that the grants have been disbursed in order to seek a better understanding of the treatment of autism. The condition affects as many as one in 49 children in New Jersey, noted O'Dowd.

The money for the awards comes from moving vehicle violations, said Caroline Eggerding, chair of The Governor's Council For Medical Research and Autism, to an appreciative laugh from the audience assembled at the press event. Eggerding advised the audience to remember that fact, when they are aggravated by a speeding ticket.

Paul Brubaker, press secretary for U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), told The Times that in April, National Autism Awareness Month, the senator "called for our autism awareness to be put into autism action, and he welcomes the very favorable response by state and local agencies that have joined him in helping to advance the research and treatment of autism, and meeting the challenge of enabling adults with autism spectrum disorder to participate in the most fulfilling and independent lives possible."

MONTCLAIR BENEFITS

Montclairites already benefit from the MSU center's programs, which include clinical and consultation services. At any given time, as many as half of the clinic's caseload of between 15 and 20 families are from Montclair, Mulcahy said.

Corinne G. Catalano, the center's school psychologist, works with elementary public schools in Montclair. Having the research coordinated at MSU means that whatever information Catalano learns, she can quickly share with local educators, she said.

That's good news for Montclair resident Sarah Otazo.

After Otazo heard Catalano speak at a Child Placement Advisory Council meeting in Montclair last month, she decided to take her autistic child to the clinic.

"Somebody had described to me that having autism is kind of like being dropped off in France, and you can't speak French," Otazo said.

During her son's first session at the clinic, recalled Otazo, "the death of his dad came out. He used little dolls, a mom and a dad. The dad went to work and died. They are finding ways to elicit things that will not come up through conversation." Otazo's husband died four and a half years ago.

Mulcahy said, "Because the center staff are also members of the Coordinating Center, we will have our fingers on the pulse of the emerging research in the state.

"That will mean we can translate that research very quickly to the clinic population."

DIAGNOSING AUTISM

The diagnostic criteria for autism changed on June 13 with the publication of the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

"The saying is, 'When you meet one child with autism, you've met one child with autism,'" said Mulcahy, noting that the condition is different in different individuals. The broad research that the grants support will help address the unique needs of people with autism, she said.

It's important to investigate broadly, said Costa, because "autism crosses racial, ethnic and economic barriers."

Among the projects funded by the grants are the development of a screening tool for culturally diverse families, and the examination of biological markers that may help identify autism and the evaluation of risk factors such as environmental pollutants and maternal health status for those diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder.

Costa said that autism is a developmental profile, and not a mental illness.

"A child with autism has a different way of experiencing the world," said the doctor. "I actually think it's not about autism awareness as much as autism acceptance, and looking at autism as part of the range of neuro-diversity."

Anxiety or depression can be associated with autism, but are not features of it, he said. After the Sandy Hook shooter was reported to have had Asperger's Syndrome, a variety of autism, the center had free open meetings for parents.

"The association of Asperger's and violence is just not there," Costa said.

MONEY FOR SERVICES

Janet Mino, a Montclair resident who teaches students with autism at John F. Kennedy High School in Newark, said that while research is important, money is needed now to fund programs for people with autism. A documentary, "Best Kept Secret," which screened in May at the Montclair Film Festival, follows Mino and the lives of six students about to "fall off the cliff," as the phrase goes, when they graduate.

"What is desperately needed now is state funding for programs for youngsters who age out of the system, and who still require needed help," Mino said.

Mulcahy agreed that older children and adults need services. However, she finds the variety of projects funded by the council is heartening.

"It means that we will have emerging science to support the programs and interventions for the families who need them.

"There's a place for both research and treatment, and we need to do both," said Mulcahy. "It's not an 'either or.' It's a 'both and.'"

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