

Wednesday, September 04, 2002

Autism's hidden biological roots

THEY sacrifice time and money to travel far and near to spread their message of hope: Autism is a treatable condition. For Sandra and Max Desorgher who uprooted themselves from the United States and The Netherlands respectively to set up their non-profit World Community Autism Programme in South Africa, they reject the long-held theory that autism is a no-cure psychiatric disorder.

Rather, they believe that the plethora of problems faced by autists has its roots in biology. To them, "autism is a neuro-gastro-immunological disorder, resulting from an immuno-genetic-error during foetal development".

Simply put, it means autism is a manifestation of multifaceted health problems affecting the brain, the gut and the immune system. They are mutually dependent. When one system goes haywire, the others follow suit. It is about cause and effect. If the immune system is down, the brain goes that way too.

These in turn are influenced by genes (in-born errors) and environmental factors, including vaccinations, pollution and the global shift towards a monoculture diet – all of which alter the way the immune system responds to diseases, foods and toxins.

In a system that is out of sync, confusion arises where the "good guys" (vital nutrients) are mistaken for the "bad" guys (pathogens). In a state of panic, the immune system attacks the good guys relentlessly, resulting in a starving brain, a leaky digestive system and a poisoned body.

Seen in this light, it is no wonder why autists appear spaced out and suffer from multiple allergies, malnutrition, malabsorption, rashes, heavy metal toxicity, yeast syndrome, constipation and diarrhoea.

They strongly believe that a holistic approach – taking into account the person's genetic make-up and understanding the immune system – is the way forward.

Not just psychological

Using behaviour modification therapy, which is the prevailing method, is insufficient. The treatment of autism, they argue, should no longer be confined to the domain of psychology. Instead, there should be a combination of methods like mainstream medicine, special diets, naturopathy, sensory integration and behaviour modification therapy to help autists realise their true potential and pave the way for recovery.

Which is why the Desoghers feel compelled to write their very insightful 400-page book, *The Power of Exile: Autism – A Journey to Recovery*. It is the culmination of seven years of extensive research, personal sacrifices and consultations with parents around the world who face the same predicament.

“By denying what is known about autism and not taking measures to unite the treatment approaches which are available now, we are keeping individuals with autism isolated from an environment of potential recovery,” says Sandra who has a masters in food sciences and nutrition.

Self-injurious behaviours like hitting and biting oneself, laughing and crying manically for no apparent reason, and the strange incomprehensible sounds they make are ways in which autists cope with pain and changes to their environment when normal communication channels have been cut off.

The first step towards recovery, say the Desorghers, is to seek biomedical intervention by way of nourishing the body with the right nutrients. It is only when the body begins to heal that the mind starts to work. Above all, the critical element in the long, rocky road to recovery is a touch of love.

The message of hope resonates throughout their book.

The book is very enlightening although certain chapters appear rather overwhelming as they attempt to address parents, doctors and researchers simultaneously with voluminous medical citations.

Nevertheless, the book challenges conventional wisdom that autism is a life-long disability. It offers fresh insight into the science of overcoming autism based on the remarkable recovery of Sandra’s adopted daughter, Sara, who turned 18 recently.

When Sara came into Sandra’s life at six, she was severely autistic with a history of sexual abuse and another handicap: she could not see. It was through Sandra’s fortitude, loving touch, perseverance and most importantly, her acumen in food sciences and nutrition that Sara gradually overcame the odds.

By 11, Sara no longer met the criteria of an autistic person. She finally joined the ranks of the neurologically typical society. For someone who was once impeded by mental retardation and the absence of speech, Sara fought back, emerging as a bright student, winning national spelling contests, among others. She got out of her cocoon, earned herself a home-coming queen title and became, what Sandra proudly proclaims, “a social butterfly”.

Like many autists, Sara suffered from food intolerance. One bad food would set her off. Sara’s reaction to foods prompted Sandra to investigate. It was not too difficult for Sandra to unravel the causes because by then she was already an expert in her own right as a seasoned nurse whose niche was preparing special diets in hospitals.

Sara’s diet

That and her penchant for reading medical journals ferociously – a habit she acquired as a kid – put her in good stead to develop a nutrition protocol which has since become known as “Sara’s Diet”.

Since then, Sandra has been providing nutritional consultation to over 2,000 parents worldwide, including doctors and scientists searching for a cure for their own autistic children.

Basically, Sara's Diet calls for a removal of "lutein" foods and providing a diet that meets all the nutrient needs of the individual on a daily basis, explains Sandra.

For Sandra had made a startling discovery: autists are unable to tolerate foods with lutein, a pigment containing yellow compounds derived from chlorophyll. Owing to the breakdown in their immune system, autists lack the ability to remove the pigment waste products from their body. They remain in the body as toxins, wreaking havoc.

Foods high in lutein include kale (*kailan*), spinach, yellow corn, pumpkin, carrot, chicken skin (and its fats), egg yolk, orange, peach, plum, strawberries and kiwi fruit.

As these foods exact pain and other discomforts to their body as well as distort their vision and hearing, autists are generally lutein-avoiders. Instead they are addicts to foods containing gluten (wheat bread, for instance) and casein (dairy products) as the undigested proteins give autists a high similar to morphine.

In addition to lutein, Sandra finds that most autists cannot tolerate foods with beta-cryptoxanthin. The major culprits are orange juice, tangerine, papaya, mango and apple juice. For those who are under this category, they are also very likely to have allergic responses to fish and shell fish.

Beta-carotene cause

Foods containing beta-carotene (touted by mainstream science as precursors of vitamin A) are also bad news for autists. Carrot, orange, pumpkin, apricot, kale, and sweet potato are high up on the list.

Unfortunately, it has been ingrained in us that beta-carotene is good. This may be true for the healthy, normal population. But for those whose immune system is extremely vulnerable, the Desorghers fear choosing beta-carotene over the actual sources of vitamin A – like cod liver oil which is critical to brain development and good vision – can result in "tragic errors".

They note that over the last 30 years since the World Health Organisation advocated the intake of beta-carotene for vitamin A, there has been a sharp rise in autism. They do not think it is mere coincidence. They suspect deficiency in vitamin A has contributed to the adverse reaction to vaccination and the attendant autistic tendencies that developed thereafter.

But for the Desorghers, all this can be reversed with a good lutein-free diet. Unlike the casein-free, gluten-free diet which can be very restrictive over time if no substitutes are in place, Sara's Diet aims to do the opposite. When eliminating lutein in the diet, they find that it takes about four months to calm down the immune system. Once the toxic burden of lutein is gone together with the removal of gluten and casein in the diet, the Desorghers believe the immune system can be "re-taught" not to attack the good guys.

Little attention to diet

Dietary intervention, they lament, has been given very little attention and yet, “this form of treatment has resulted in more incidents of symptom-free autists than any other reported therapy”.

Doctors’ failure in understanding the science of nutrition was in part to blame for the increasing number of children with autism and other learning disabilities.

Still, ever optimistic and passionate about their cause, the Desorghers are determined to reach out to as many doctors and caregivers as they can to drive home their point: autism is treatable.

They have given up a life of material comforts to do just that.

There had been times when they were penniless to support their work. But they were undeterred.

It is through Sara that Sandra found her calling in life. Raised in a family where altruism reigns – her grandparents and parents fostered many troubled kids – and holding on to the conviction that, “God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love and discipline,” Sandra continues her mission with Max to save the autists in the world.

Her wisdom in medicine and her vast experience in nurturing and nursing the body and mind is set to change and challenge the archaic world view on autism.

***The Power of Exile: Autism – A Journey to Recovery** by Sandra and Max Desorgher is published by World Community Autism Program (WCAP). To order the book, a money order of US\$29.95 (RM113.81) + US\$10 (RM38, for shipping) can be sent to WCAP, 9 Pansy Road, Raisethorpe 3201, KZN South Africa. Website: <http://www.saras-autism-diet.freeservers.com>. Sandra and Max Desorgher will be holding a full-day seminar in Kuala Lumpur on Oct 20 on Sara’s Diet and the holistic approach in the treatment of autism and other related disorders. Their book will also be launched on that day. For details, contact Leong at 017-333 0095 or Jacquelyn at 016-209 2397.*

One Voice is a monthly column which serves as a platform for professionals, parents and careproviders of children with learning difficulties. Feedback on the column can be sent to LSACSB@po.jaring.my. For enquiries of services and support groups, please call Malaysian Care at 03-4149 8032 or Dignity & Services at 03-7783 0849.