

Foreword

It is a particular pleasure for me to write the foreword to this excellent collection of papers. Many of the papers have been written by international leaders in the field, several of whom are known to me as good friends and colleagues. Over much of my professional life I have had an intense interest in autism. I have seen major changes in attitudes towards this condition. The previous culture of blaming the parents has given way to sound scientific studies, particularly in the fields of genetics and neuroimaging, that leave little doubt about the neurobiological basis. In addition, there has been a sharp rise in the awareness of how more subtle aspects of autism can result in major handicaps in social interaction, requiring skilled management. The previous narrow diagnostic criteria, sometimes termed as “Kanner autism” have given way to the broader definition of “autism spectrum disorder”. The implications of this are being shown clearly through the rapid rise in apparent prevalence of the condition from a few per 10,000 to over 1%. Autism spectrum disorder cannot be considered as a rare condition that affects only a tiny proportion of the population; it is a relatively common condition that has profound consequences for the individual and family, as well as having far-reaching implications for the resources required for adequate management. The papers in this issue combine the interesting and informative with the inspirational. Not only are there “cutting edge” scientific papers of high-quality but there are also moving papers that remind us of the way in which autism can impact on the lives of real people. They indicate the major challenges still facing us in achieving better understanding and management of autism.

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