**HEALTHCARE EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

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**Objectives:**  Autism has predominantly been diagnosed more in males than females. Recent explorations of male and female presentations have suggested that autism may be diagnosed less in females because their behaviours differ in some ways than the behaviours typically associated with autistic males. Females are often misdiagnosed and diagnosed later than males, putting them at a disadvantage for accessing services and supports and resulting in unmet healthcare needs. Research on the presentation and behavioural patterns of autism in girls and women is growing; however there is a need for more qualitative research exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of autistic girls and women with regards to healthcare experiences, including the of experiences of seeking an autism diagnosis. The goal of this study was to explore the healthcare experiences and recommendations of autistic girls and women.

**Methods:** A qualitative descriptive approach was taken, involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with three groups of participants: girls on the autism spectrum (12-18 years old), women on the autism spectrum (18 years and older) and parents of autistic girls and women. Transcripts were professionally transcribed and Nvivo software was used to organize the data. Analytic meetings were held, where key ideas were discussed and informed a coding scheme. Two coders independently coded the transcripts, and created analytic memos based on full-group discussions.

**Results:** Six focus groups and 20 individual interviews were held, consisting of 23 girls and women with a clinical diagnosis of autism, four women who had self-diagnosed themselves with autism (ages 12-71 years), and 21 parents. Participants were diagnosed between the ages of 2-63 years. When discussing the diagnosis process, participants attributed obstacles encountered in the diagnostic process to being misunderstood by frontline clinicians and not fitting mainstream and stereotypical presentations of autism. Relating to overall healthcare experiences, participants discussed not feeling understood and difficulties with advocating for their healthcare needs. Participants recommended education and awareness as two key areas for healthcare improvements. A better understanding of the communication and sensory challenges associated with autism, as well as an understanding of non-stereotypical presentations of autism would be beneficial to improving the health care experiences of autistic girls and women.

**Discussion:** We identified key challenges faced by girls and women on the autism spectrum from their perspectives on their healthcare experiences and diagnosis processes. The recommendations provided by the participants may help reduce some of the health care barriers faced by this population and aid them in accessing healthcare that is tailored to their needs. Greater awareness of presentations of autism in girls and women may help promote earlier recognition and diagnosis and better health care experiences.