

‘See the Bigger Picture’

3-4 April, 2003; Edinburgh, UK

This conference took place in Edinburgh in April, 2003. It focused on learning difficulties and was aimed at both parents and teachers. It was organised by Mindfield (now called Mindroom) – a charitable organisation set up by a parent who has a child with learning difficulties. More information about this charity can be found at its website: www.mindroom.org. This website is currently being developed and it will (when fully developed) contain information on the different learning disabilities as well as information about its other activities for anyone who is interested.

This was the first conference to be run by the charity, and this attracted an impressive number of experts from abroad and the UK. The presentations covered the main learning difficulties and also the implications for teachers when dealing with children with learning difficulties.

Christopher Gillberg from Göteborg in Sweden started the conference with an interesting overview of research into ADD and ADHD and the change (mainly within Scandinavia) to the use of the term DAMP (which stands for Deficits in Attention, Motor skills and Perception). He explored the distinction between attention deficits (which do not necessarily lead to hyperactivity) and attention deficits linked to hyperactivity. The way diagnosis was carried out was explained and the role of medication (traditionally Ritalin) was considered. In addition, there was emphasis on the need for other types of intervention before medication is used.

The second presentation by the same speaker focused on autism and autistic spectrum disorders, stating that at least four variants have been identified. Again research findings were presented and the origins of autistic spectrum disorders were considered. The evidence suggests a clear genetic link in severe cases; however, brain lesions were also identified as a possible cause. The fact that autistic spectrum disorders often occur with a range of other difficulties was explained. It was suggested that dysfunction in at least four different areas of the brain are associated with autism and that neural dysfunction linked either to genetic factors or brain damage (lesions) was responsible. Autism is not associated with social class or social deprivation (except possibly in severe cases). It was stressed that it was important to treat those with autistic spectrum disorder as people first – and not as ‘autistics’. It was also clear that the environment has to adjust to take into account the needs of those with autistic spectrum disorders and that there are interventions that enable those with autistic spectrum disorders to integrate into

society more successfully.

This presentation was followed by one by Svenny Kopp (also from Sweden). She concentrated on exploring the incidence of ADHD in girls. The main message from this presentation, which was based on a longitudinal study of girls, was that there is likely to be underdiagnosis of ADHD in girls. Girls are more likely to be diagnosed as having ‘learning difficulties’ than ADHD even when they present similarly to boys who are diagnosed as ADHD. However, the ratio between boys and girls in terms of diagnosis has changed from 6-9 boys to 1 girl in 1987, to 2.3 boys to 1 girl in 1999.

Another presentation on ADHD – this time in relation to executive function in the brain followed on. It was presented by Thomas Brown from Yale University. It outlined a particular model of ADHD and emphasised (as had the others) that the behaviours exhibited by a child with ADHD were outwith the control of the child. The child with ADHD can display a great deal of concentration when engaged in an activity that motivates him/her; however, this kind of attention is not sustainable when motivation is lacking ... and the child is not able to control this. This particular presentation focused strongly on the role of medication for ADHD and stated that no other alternatives had been demonstrated to be of benefit. (more of this later ...)

Finally on the Wednesday there was a presentation from a different perspective. This presentation came from Loretta Giorcelli from Sydney, Australia. Her focus was on how to deal with children with learning difficulties in the classroom. Her approach emphasised the need to work with teachers and support them in developing ways of dealing with the particular difficulties that children with learning difficulties present.

The Thursday sessions started with a presentation by Sam Goldstein from University of Utah (Neurology, Learning and Behaviour Centre). It had an intriguing title – which set the scene for the talk – ‘Good days are when bad things don’t happen’. This was a quote from a child with ADHD that Sam Goldstein had worked with in his clinic. The message about the causes of learning difficulties were similar to the previous presentations – but this presentation included examples of children that Sam Goldstein had worked with. One particularly interesting example was an adult (diagnosed with ADHD) who had dropped out of school and starting working in a labouring job. However, he gradually realised that he wanted to better himself ... and he finally was admitted to Harvard!

Edinburgh Conference Centre



The following session seriously questioned the emphasis placed on Ritalin in treating children with ADHD. One of the earlier speakers had argued that this was the only way to deal with ADHD. Alex Richardson (Senior Research Fellow at Oxford) presented an alternative. Her work has focused on the role of nutrition in developmental disorders and in particular on the role of fatty acids. There is now clear experimental evidence that for some children a change in diet can have a considerable effect on their behaviour and their performance. She quoted an interesting study with a different population – a study carried out in a prison. The difference in behaviour (and reoffending) was striking for a number of participants. There were significant differences between the experimental group who were given a specific diet which included ensuring sufficient fatty acids and those in the control group. Similar studies have been carried out on children with dyslexia – and for some of these children the use of a fatty acid supplement has led to better performance. So there was a clear message – diet can make a difference!

The final main session was presented by Samy Molcho from Vienna. His focus was on the need to interpret non-verbal language of children with learning difficulties. Samy Molcho is one of the most famous mime artists of the 20th century so this was a presentation with a difference! He illustrated his points through his performance

(and at times stunned the audience as he appeared in amongst them). However, the message was clear – non-verbal communication is important and an understanding of both our non-verbal messages to others and those from others can greatly enhance our communication. This is especially so when dealing with children who may have difficulties with language.

Finally, one of the parallel sessions explained the issues surrounding investigating children with learning difficulties. This talk came from David Fitzpatrick from the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh. His talk focused on those with severe and global learning difficulties. The main emphasis was on the major diagnostic tools – when and how these should be used. It also considered the impact on a family when a child is diagnosed with GLD (global learning difficulties).

This was a fascinating conference which provided insights into research in this area and also the issues around diagnosis and treatment. I have my own copy a CD rom with the presentations if anybody is interested in more in-depth information (it also includes a number of references) and I also have a video about AD/HD. The SCRE website (www.scre.ac.uk) has a paper by Alex Richardson on fatty acids and developmental disorders (go into the website and search for Dyslexia).

Elisabet Weedon

Learning Disabilities Conference – Gloucester – 7 August 2003

Areas

Counties – West Midlands, Avon, Dorset, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Wiltshire, Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, West Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, & South Wales

Towns – Birmingham, Bristol, Worcester, Droitwich, Gloucester, Hereford, Southampton, Kidderminster, Bath, Weston-Super-Mare, Reading, Slough, Windsor, Exeter, Plymouth, Torquay, Poole, Cheltenham, Tewkesbury, Malvern

Facts and Figures

Venue: Ramada Hotel & Resort, Matson Lane, Robinswood Hill, Gloucester, GL4 6EA

Date: Thursday 7 August 2003 (9.30am – 4.30pm)

Booking Info: 0113 210 8778

Target Attendees: Consultants, Junior Medical Staff, Midwives, GP's, Health Visitors, Specialist Nurses, A&E Staff, Social Workers, Counsellors, Learning Disability Teams, all those with an interest in Teaching

Speakers: Professor Stephen Brown, Dr Mark Scheepers (Learning Disabilities Consultant), Mary Evans (Community Nurse), Nicola Waycott (Epilepsy Specialist Nurse), Dr Katarzyna Sieradzka (Consultant Neurologist), Mr Kevin Kelly (Epilepsy Specialist Nurse)

Topics: Clinic & Patient Management, Pharmacology, SIGN Guidelines, National Sentinel Audit & Action Plan, Women's Issues, The Role of the Community Learning Disability Nurse, Children's Learning Disabilities and Surgery, Learning Disability Service v Neurological Service, Epidemiology, Rescue Medication, Risk Assessment, Differential Diagnosis

Local Contacts

Lucy Rollinson, Monica Cooper, Ruth Wood, Judy Stutchberry @ Epilepsy Action, and/or any of the speakers.

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EA shares their knowledge and vision for epilepsy through their conferences, allowing you to get a head start in NHS Planned initiatives & current developments. You are the decision makers whom we intend to collaborate with to improve care and challenge initiatives. Our aim is to raise the awareness of current issues concerning learning disabilities and epilepsy.

Other Conferences

Area	Date	Topic
Kent	19 September 2003	Good Practice
North Wales	30 September 2003	To be arranged
Aberdeen	30 October 2003	Developing Epilepsy Services
Birmingham	20 November 2003	Good Practice
Bristol	27 November 2003	Diagnosis & Epilepsy

