

Dietitians in Autism - an Interview with Zoe Connor, Chairperson Dietitians in Autism

For many individuals with autism issues around food and diet play a significant part in their lives, I caught up with Zoe Connor the chairperson of 'Dietitians in Autism' to get an understanding of the role of the Dietitian in the sphere of autism.

Zoe, you are chairperson of 'Dietitians in Autism' how did your interest in dietary factors in autism emerge?

My interest in working with individuals on the spectrum started at university when I was a volunteer befriender for a 10-year old via the National Autistic Society scheme. I then went on to qualify as a general hospital dietitian and a few years later to specialise in community paediatrics. It was then that I found that a large proportion of my NHS workload was children on the spectrum. I had had almost no specialised training in dealing with children on the spectrum so sought out help from colleagues and became aware of the British Dietetic Association Dietitians in Autism group - which was a great help. I became an active member and then stood for chair when the position became vacant.

Whilst you must look at each case on an individual basis are there any general dietary features which in your experience have an overall positive effect for an individual with autism?

All cases are different. I strongly believe a varied and balanced diet is necessary for a healthy body and mind. Much of my work is helping fussy (or selective) eaters overcome their anxieties around foods to enable them to enjoy a varied diet. As for special diets and supplements - I follow the research closely, but don't tend to recommend these. However, if any individual has gut problems such as constipation or deficiencies such as anaemia, these can undoubtedly affect a person's mood and functioning - so I focus on addressing these - which may include trials of food exclusions or supplements.

Do you practice locally or are you able to offer your expertise UK wide?

My practice is based in the West Midlands - I have a clinic in Stratford upon Avon. However, I do do phone and Skype consultations for clients all around the country (and overseas) when needed. It is always easier to see someone in person though, so I advise non-local clients to look for a more local dietitian first - either via their GP or by searching www.freelancedietitians.org.

Where do you see the future for dietary and nutrition in autism and what has been the biggest advance in the last five years?

The research being done worldwide into potential metabolic causes or contributing factors to autism (or should we say the autisms) is exciting in that it may uncover subsets of people on the spectrum that benefit from tailored supplements or medications. The evidence is not quite there yet though, so we need researchers, medics and dieticians to work together to ensure the research is interpreted appropriately and consistent advice given which doesn't put any individual's health at risk.

If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.

