

The Royal College of General Practitioners in Northern Ireland

The Royal College of General Practitioners in Northern Ireland (RCGP) is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Autism Bill and proposed Autism Strategy.

The Royal College of General Practitioners in Northern Ireland has over 1,200 local GPs as members, which accounts for over 80% of all GPs in Northern Ireland. Our membership includes GPs from a range of work areas including registrars, locum GPs, trainers, tutors and academic GPs. The Royal College of General Practitioners is an international organisation with over 40,000 members worldwide, making us the largest Royal College within the United Kingdom.

As a registered charity we place the needs and care of patients at the centre of our work. Our aim is to encourage and maintain the highest standards of general medical practice and act as the 'voice' of General Practitioners on education, training and issues about standards of care for patients.

Response

The RCGP Northern Ireland (NI) is grateful for the opportunity General Practitioners are in a prime position to witness the effects of autism on the lives of patients' and their families/carers and the RCGP NI welcomes the publicity that the debate surrounding the bill has brought to this condition.

RCGP NI is aware of the current Autism Act 2009 in England and the subsequent Autism Strategy in England.

Accurate information regarding autism diagnosis, prevalence, management, and support in Northern Ireland is needed and any strategy adequately addressing this would be welcome.

The resource required to address this particular area of disability adequately would be considerable but without a specific review of the current position for autistic spectrum disorder in Northern Ireland it is difficult to proceed with any plan for the future. Although the resource implications for such a strategy are expansive, that itself, should not deny sufferers of this condition the opportunity to have their care and support assessed.

Any strategy would however have to include provision of relevant services for the purposes of diagnosing autistic spectrum conditions in the adult population as well as in childhood and the range of symptoms and variation in severity of manifestation brings ambitious challenges. However within the boundaries of current resources, adults and children with autism should be able to seek help on a level playing field with other disability groups.

With regard to changes to the wording of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, it is not clear that this is necessary and in fact could lead to confusion over the definition and interpretation of the term “social” with regards to disability.

In England in October 2010 the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was replaced by the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act defines a person with a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The Act does not include the word “social” in its definition.

The Autism Act in England was set up before the implementation of the Equality Act, i.e. under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Autism Act makes no mention of the term “social disability”. The act placed a duty on the Secretary of State to prepare and publish an autism strategy in England.

Within the English Autism Strategy which arose from the Autism Act, autism is defined as a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and lists three main areas of difficulty: social communication, social interaction and social imagination. The strategy makes no mention of the term “social disability”.

Inserting the word ”social” into section (1) of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is not needed to accept autism as a disability. Autism is a complex developmental disability affecting psychological and behavioural development and is not defined as a “social” disability.