



Services and Support for Individuals with Autism:

A comparative study between the UK and Saudi Arabia



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1. Introduction

Autism is a development disorder which appears during the first three years of the life causing repetitive behavior and affects the child's ability to interact and communicate with others. It has been defined from different perspectives. In the medical field it is defended as "A spectrum of neuropsychiatry disorders characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication, and unusual and repetitive behaviour" (Medicine Net, 2010, #1). From an educational perspective, the Autism Speaks Organization defines it as "a general term used to describe a group of complex developmental brain disorders known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). The other pervasive developmental disorders are PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified), Asperger's Syndrome, Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder" (Autism Speaks, 2010, #1). Temple Grandin a scientist and one of the individuals with high functioning autism has defined it in her book *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* as "A defect in the system which process incoming sensory information causes the child to over-react to some stimuli and under-react to others"(Grandin, 2005:9).

In the early of 1940s Leo Kenner and Hans Asperser were the first people who named this disorder in their publication. Although the use of the term did not



exist before that date, there are some evidence emphasizing that autism was known centuries ago. After the Second World War the late 1950s and during 1960s professionals started to pay more attention to this disorder. Europe and the USA were in the lead in investigating autism aspects followed by the rest of the world (Frith, 2008). Autism has become an international crisis. According to the last report from Centre for Disease Control (CDC) 1 in 110 American children has autism (Autism Speaks Organization, 2010) where in the UK it effects 1 in 100 which means over half a million people have autism (The National Autistic Society, 2010). The cause of autism is still unknown; consequently, no one can tell what the cure of autism is. However, because autism affects the child's ability to communicate and interact with others he or she will not benefit from the normal curriculum and will face problems in social interaction with peers in the school (Grandin, 2005). Therefore, special education services are required in order to meet their special needs and help them to overcome their learning difficulties. Currently, there is a common agreement that, early intervention and special education programs are the most effective and beneficial treatment methods (Frith, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the differences and similarities between the UK and Saudi Arabia in terms of the quality and quantity of the services provided for autistic people in order to answer two questions, first, what are the present services in Saudi Arabia? And second, how to improve them? The aim of using the UK as a model in this comparison is to clarify the present situation in Saudi Arabia in order



to make the necessary changes and meet the international standers in programs and services to help individuals with autism to reach their potential and support their families which consequently will benefit the society as a whole. The structure of this academic paper will be as followed, Part 1 will show the services for individuals with autism in both countries in terms of early intervention services, education programs and schools, vocational rehabilitation and employment. Part 2 will demonstrate support for families by supporting centres and programs, workshops, courses, lectures and services in public places. Part 3 will discuss the role of organizations, associations and research centres in relation to raising public awareness, voluntary work, and conducting research. Finally, part 4 concludes the ARP with a summary and some recommendations need to be taking into consideration in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to improve services for individuals with autism.

2. Services for individuals with autism

The first step after diagnosis the child with autism is to provide early intervention services. Intervention refers to "Any interaction between two people to bring about change"(Wall, 2006:129). In special education field early intervention refers to the work with children with disability in an early stage to prevent development problems or minimize them as much as possible (Michael, 1997). In both countries (the UK and Saudi Arabia) parents, professionals, and policy makers believe in the importance of early intervention and emphasize that it plays a vital role of autistic children development and their educational progress (NAS, 2010; Al-



Othman, 2010). According to the National Autistic Society there are over 100 branches cross the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) support individuals affected by autism from an early age. Whereas the access to early intervention services in Saudi Arabia is limited in the major cities, Riyadh, Jeddah and Al- Dammam and it is provided only by the private sector which does not meet the increase demand on services besides it leads to financial problems for families (Al-Othman, 2010).

The general trend in the UK is to make schools more inclusive in order to provide equal opportunity for all children with special needs (Farrell, 2004). However, it is known that each child has different needs and what can be considered as a suitable learning environment for one might not work for the other (Sicile-kira, 2003). From this perspective, the National Autistic Society has established six specialist schools provide services for 500 children across the UK which work closely with children from age four and prepare them to adulthood (NAS, 2010). By contrast, Saudis schools in general are ineligible for inclusion and this make policy makers adopting special schools and centres as alternative education to provide services for children with autism. Across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are three centres specialized in autism, Academy of Special Education, Jeddah Centre for Autism and Prince Faisal bin Fahd mother's Centre (Al-Othman, 2010). All of these centres adopt TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) as a comprehensive



educational program for all children in school age. One of the problems of using TEACCH program in all of these centres is that it is not suitable for all autistic children especially children with high function autism.

In terms of vocational rehabilitation and employment support for adults with autism, there are many training collages and organizations across the UK specialized in advising, guiding and supporting autistic adults such as, the Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) and Placing Assessment and Counseling Teams (PACT) (Shattock, Linfoot, 1996). On the other hand, Saudi Autistic Society has run a new summer program for adults with autism. This program provides training in computer skills and other technical skills (Saudi Autistic Society, 2010). A reservation which can be applied to this program is that it is limited in summer vacation besides it is not offer a wide variety of training. However, specialists in the UK emphasize on the importance of raising awareness between employers about autistic people abilities and the nature of their disability in order to provide equal opportunities for all people (Matthews & McCormick, 1994). The National Autistic Society record shows that only 15% of autistic adults have full-time job and 51% have been unemployed and without access to any benefits for long time (NAS, 2010).



3. Support for families

In each area in England there are centres to teach parents of autistic individuals about how to deal with their children or adults and how to cope up with life demands. The National Autistic Society has two programs to support parents, *help!* and *help! 2* (NAS, 2010). For example, in *help!* parents and carers receive immediate support after diagnosis the child with autism. The program contains basic knowledge about autism disorder besides information and advice in stress and anger management. In addition, siblings support is included in this service (NAS, 2010). Unfortunately, this kind of local services is not available for parents in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Autistic Society, 2010). In addition to the need of supporting programs, parents in both countries share the same concern and thirst for knowledge, they want to know about the newest treatments, therapist or interventions which could possibly work with their children. Thus, workshops, courses and lectures are essential to elucidate the aspects of autism which are still vague and under investigation by researchers and specialists (Sicile-kira, 2003). These workshops and courses are usually provided by associations and universities such as, *Sheffield Hallam University* and *The National Autistic Society* in the UK (Sheffield Hallam University, 2010; NAS, 2010) and *Saudi Autistic Society* in Saudi Arabia (SAS, 2010).



In terms of services in public places, disabled people in the UK have equal access to all public places. However, some places require special arrangement in advance and some not. Gaynor Nice a mother of an autistic child has described her experience in one of the famous places in England *Legoland she said, " My son Alex is six next month. We have been twice with him and the great thing is, because of his condition, Alex and up to two carers (Mum and Dad, in his case) are given a special exit pass. Basically this means that you are given a special hand-stamp and you go to the exit of each ride. When the ride stops, you are immediately allowed on first which avoids queuing- a problem, as you know, with children on the spectrum"*(Communication, 2010, 26). In Saudi Arabia there are not any special services for families in public places due to the lack of awareness and the absence of applying policies.

4. Organizations, Associations, and research centres role

There is no doubt that raising public awareness is one of the most important roles of organizations and associations. Raising awareness has a positive influence on autistic individuals' life and their families, therefore, 144 countries have signed the UN convention of disabled people rights which activated in May 2008 in order to reduce discrimination and the negative attitudes of society towards people with disability (WAAD, 2010). Each year in the second of April the world celebrate the Autism Awareness Day which aims to develop people knowledge all around the world about autism disorder in order to develop better understanding of the warning



sign which consequently lead to early diagnosis and intervention. In addition, it is encourage societies to provide fair and caring community for individuals affected by this disorder (WAAD, 2010). The UK and Saudi Arabia have almost the same activities such as, Walk for Autism, exhibitions and workshops related to autism disorder. It is worth mentioning that for the first time in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia World Autism Awareness day 2010 have covered all regions of the kingdom and supported by the government (Economic electronic, 2010) where it was in the past centered only in the capital city and did not receive sufficient covered by the media.

Another role of associations is to encourage voluntary work. As the National Autistic Society (2010) indicates there are four types of volunteer work across the UK, first, Volunteer Speaker which aims to raise money for the National Autistic Society, second, Befriend which suitable for people who have time to spend with autistic individuals or their families for couple of hours each week by sharing indoor or outdoor activities, third, Volunteer in Special Group for volunteers who want to join a social group of people with high-function autism or Asperger syndrome for one evening each month and finally, Volunteer in National Autistic Society special schools which depends on schools needs for volunteers (NAS, 2010). By contrast, although there is a great voluntary effort provided by different charity sectors in Saudi Arabia, there is no clear volunteering system or information available in Saudi Autistic Society website (SAS, 2010).



On the subject of conducting research, although the UK outweighs Saudi Arabia in the quality and the quantity of conducting research, researchers in both countries are similar in that they both believe in the importance of autism research in order to develop the current knowledge which leads to better understanding of the causes and effect of autism. In the UK, research centres are related to universities or associations. For instance, the National Autistic Society research department provides more than 24,000 research papers about autism besides free access to recent researches for students and professionals (NAS, 2010). Another example is Cambridge Autism Research Centre (ARC). This centre focuses on studying the causes, assessment tools and intervention methods (ARC, 2010). On the other hand, there are three research centres in Saudi Arabia, Autism Research Centre, research department in Saudi Autistic Society, and Prince Salman Centre for Disability Research (ARC, 2010; SAS, 2010; PSCD 2010). For example, the mission of Prince Salman Centre for Disability Research is to improve the quality of disable people's life by emphasizing on equality and human rights. This mission achieved by conducting researches related to disabilities issues and by organizing conferences and workshops related to the current research topics through the year (PSCD, 2010).



5. Conclusion

This research paper has given a short introduction of autism spectrum disorder, its definitions and treatment and compared services provided for people with autism in both countries (the UK and Saudi Arabia) in terms of the quality and the quantity of services provided for autistic children, adults and their families. In regards to early intervention services, there are 100 centres in the UK specialized in helping autistic children from an early age where in Saudi Arabia the access to these services are limited in the major cities in the Kingdom. It is also discussed that the general trend in educating children with autism in the UK is to teach them in regular classrooms whereas schools in Saudi Arabia still ineligible for inclusion which leads to adopt special schools and centres as an educational alternative. With respect to vocational rehabilitation, in the UK there are many training collages and organizations specially established for this sort of rehabilitation and its related issues whereas in Saudi Arabia there is one new program opens in the capital city in summer 2010. In terms of services for families, in the UK families have equal opportunities in accessing public places and receive a continuous support from the National Autistic society support centres where in Saudi Arabia these services and support are not available due to the lack of awareness and applying polices. This ARP has also discussed the role of organizations, associations and research centres in terms of raising awareness, encouraging voluntary works and conducting



research which is generally more organized and effective in the UK compared to Saudi Arabia.

From the comparison given above, some suggestions can be made in order to enhance the present services in Saudi Arabia for individuals with autism and meet their families' expectations. It is suggested that the government has to build centres for early detection of autism symptoms and early diagnosis. These centres must be related to public hospitals and run by professional teamworks who also have to be responsible for providing advice and basic information after diagnosis for parents and sibling or these information could be provided separately by independent information centres across the country. In addition, educational programs have to cover all regions of the kingdom, not only the major cities and in order to reduce the huge cost of raising an autistic child on family budget, the government has to fund autistic children's education as equal as other children. Furthermore, current autism centres have to increase their capacity and be more flexible in accepting more children in their programs besides adopting various educational programs in order to provide more options for parents to choose from to help them finding the suitable program for their child's needs. It is also suggested that besides the need of academic rehabilitation children with autism need summer clubs and entertainment programs which focused more on their abilities and talents. Additionally to the need of special schools and centres for severe conditions, making schools more inclusive is strongly required. In terms of vocational rehabilitation, it is suggested that



employment programs have to be comprehensive, run through the year and focused on labor market demands and requirements. This can be achieved by establishing training collages and organizations specialized on vocational rehabilitation which also have to be responsible on raising employers' awareness about autistic people abilities in working. A final and a very important point is that the public and private sector have to cooperate to make efforts provided more organized and effective. This in return will benefit individuals with autism, their families and the community as a whole.



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