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The 'Fever Effect'

By Damian E M Milton

In episode 4 of 'The A word', Jo, the young Autistic child depicted in the series has a fever, during which he shows more signs of reciprocal communication and empathy. Whilst it is mentioned in this program that there have been studies into the 'fever effect', in fact there have not been in-depth scientific studies carried out on this phenomenon.

The 'fever effect' was first noticed in a number of parental accounts which suggested that some autistic traits or associated behaviours reduced whilst their autistic child was experiencing a fever. This led to a study commissioned by the group 'Cure Autism Now' (which later merged with Autism Speaks) of parental accounts of their child's behaviour whilst experiencing a fever. In this study, 30 children were reported on, with a high percentage of parents recording that autistic behaviours reduced in at least one area, such as hyperactivity and irritability (measured using the 'Aberrant Behaviour Scale'). The researchers concluded that:

"The data suggest that these changes might not be solely the by product of general effects of sickness on behavior; however, more research is needed to prove conclusively fever-specific effects and elucidate their underlying biological mechanisms."

The study abstract is available here:

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/120/6/e1386.short>

Whilst the data from this study suggested that these effects may not solely be the by product of the general effects of sickness on behaviour, there is no actual scientific evidence to suggest this without further study. Parental accounts can also differ from the accounts of autistic people themselves regarding how they might experience being sick from a fever. Indeed, there have not been a significant number of similar accounts from autistic adults about a reduction in their autistic ways of acting and behaving whilst being sick, and sometimes quite the opposite. This would mean that if there is a process not attributable to the by product of the general effects of illness, that this is not a universal experience found with all autistic people. The theory of autism used in this study, that autism can be viewed as a set of behaviours to be modified, would also be criticised by many autistic people and academics for not taking into account autistic cognition or subjectivity.

Research work is continuing into this area, with a large investment from Autism Speaks in the US to study the effects of body temperature (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/science-news/nih-funds-study-exploring-why-fever-sometimes-eases-autism-symptoms>) on behaviour. This research is using mice-modelling however, and is yet to report on findings. Therefore, it may be some time before more rigorous scientific evidence can be gathered on this perceived phenomenon.