

First National Meeting on Ageing in People with Autism Spectrum Conditions:

Cognitive and Neurobiological Ageing in ASC

“What about old age?”

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Newcastle University



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I attended this conference as a representative of the London Autistic Rights Movement and as a sixty-five year old man with Asperger syndrome viewing the remaining years of my life with considerable trepidation.

The fact that a conference highlighting the plight of older people on the autistic spectrum took place at all must be positive; but as an attempt to find a co-ordinated approach to finding practical solutions to clearly stated problems, I think it failed.

The problems faced by older autistic people seem to me to fall somewhere between two extremes; that of the lower functioning autistic person who outlives his or her carers and will need to be cared for by somebody else and the higher functioning autistic person, who has probably struggled on throughout their life in the face of indifference and occasional hostility, whose problems will increase considerably with the onset of failing health.

If anybody, during the morning sessions, proposed simple, practical ways of easing the plight of older autistic people, I missed it. In the afternoon the research being conducted, sounded academically interesting and will no doubt result in some well received scholarly papers, but what good it will do for the problems of older autistic people was again lost on me. I would have also appreciated someone explaining to me how the work of the different speakers fitted together – I suspect that it did not.

I attended the ‘Strategies and Policies’ workshop, which was again dominated by the experts and in which I not only heard nothing that convinced me that my fast approaching old-age would be rendered less uncomfortable by these people’s efforts, but my attempts to ask a question regarding practical solutions were ignored by those chairing the session.

This failure of the conference was due, in my opinion, to two causes: the presence of experts so absorbed in their own narrow fields of interest that they seem to have completely lost sight of the bigger picture and the presence of young people who, although well meaning and probably well qualified, haven't lived long enough to experience life or acquire any understanding of human nature or behaviour. The former group have a valid role and the latter can be useful, but only if their efforts are directed by a very able and practical project manager.

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