UC DAVIS HEALTH | MEDICAL CENTER
Medical Interpreting Services

Medical Interpreting Services Department

Newsletter

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This Doctor Can: The autistic doctor

Source: https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/doctor-can-autistic-doctor

Discovering she was autistic helped make sense of everything for Dr Mary Doherty. She describes the joys of building a community of autistic doctors.

I've always been autistic. I didn't know this as a child, when I was utterly obsessed with the human body and determined to be a doctor, nor as a young adult struggling through medical school and the training years. How did I get to be a consultant anaesthetist in my mid 40s before anyone realised?

Dr Mary Doherty, consultant anesthetist, Our Ladies' Hospital, Navan, Ireland

I've always had to battle the social and sensory challenges that go with being autistic, but until recently without having any idea what was happening, why life constantly seemed so difficult and other people seemed so odd. Multiple opportunities for an accurate diagnosis were missed as I struggled in vain throughout my adult life to find help for recurrent anxiety and depression.

It was only when my son was diagnosed as autistic that everything finally made sense: my unconventional lifestyle and career path, my sequential interests which are unusual in their variety and intensity, my sensory preferences and my absolute need for solitude. Finally understanding that my experience of the world is different from that of non-autistic people allows me to understand my needs and ensure they are met, and at this point I love being autistic and no longer struggle with mental health issues.

Being diagnosed or self-identifying as autistic can be difficult for a doctor. It can feel very isolating, because autism remains widely misunderstood and unfortunately is still a stigmatised condition. My quest to connect with other autistic doctors led me to start a peer-to-peer online support group, Autistic Doctors International, which is growing rapidly. There are so many of us working in medicine, and most are still unrecognised and unsupported.

Medicine selects for autistic traits. High-achieving autistic individuals are intensely focused perfectionists with great attention to detail and often have particular strengths in pattern recognition, all skills which are clearly advantageous in medicine. Autistic people are often creative thinkers and problem solvers, and contrary to popular assumptions have been shown to exhibit high degrees of empathy. Increased recognition means more students are entering medical school with an existing autism diagnosis. For others, it is only when the demands of postgraduate training or independent practice, perhaps coupled with adverse life events, overwhelm existing coping strategies that diagnosis, support and adjustments become essential.

Autism is associated with co-occurring psychiatric disorders, notably anxiety and depression, which occur in up to 80% of people with autism. Suicide rates in autistic adults are nine times greater than

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April 2023 Calendar

National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month
National Child Abuse Prevention Month

1 - Lupus Alert Day (International)
2 - World Autism Awareness Day (US)
2-8 – National Public Health Week (US)
5 - Passover (Judaism)
6- Theravada New Year (Buddhism)
7 - Good Friday (Western Christian)
9 - Easter Day (Western Christian)
11 - World Parkinson's Day
14 – National Donate Life Day (US)
15 - National ASL Day (US)
16 - Easter Day (Orthodox Christian)
17 – Laylat al-Qadr (Islam)
22 – Eid al-Fitr (Islam)
22 – Earth Day (International)
27-29 – Gathering of the Nations Powwow (US)

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the general population and because we know that suicide is a particular concern for doctors, we can surmise an even greater risk for autistic doctors – particularly those who remain unsupported and possibly undiagnosed. While many are practising successfully, autistic doctors commonly experience personal and professional difficulties. Change of career or early retirement is common, yet with specific support many of these difficulties are remediable, and timely support would lead to increased retention of highly skilled colleagues.

Recognising that I am autistic allows me to understand the challenges of living in a society designed for the non-autistic majority and to find strategies to cope effectively. I'm happier now than at any point in my life and the joy of building a community of autistic doctors is deeply fulfilling.

Does language change how you perceive colors?

Source: https://www.altalang.com/beyond-words/language-colors/

If you look at a color spectrum, you will find the number of colors is infinite. The spectrum has no end or beginning, and there is no limit to the number of gradations that exist. When an English speaker looks at that spectrum, however, they tend to identify 11 broad color categories: black, white, yellow, green, red, blue, pink, gray, brown, orange, and purple.

If you're an interior designer or a painter, you might also be able to identify colors like cyan or sapphire, but they are still usually thought of as specifications within the fixed eleven: both are shades of blue. To a Russian speaker, however, cyan and sapphire do not fall within the same broader category. Cyan would be instead a type of goluboy (light blue), while sapphire would be a type of siniy (dark blue).

An evolving hypothesis

It was once thought that the number of categories a language uses to define colors determines its speakers' ability to distinguish between those colors. This hypothesis was soon debunked, and it's easy to understand why. English may not have two different words for dark versus light shades of blue, but English speakers are certainly able to distinguish between the two. A less extreme version of the hypothesis, however, may hold some water.

In a 2007 study, scientists at Stanford had English and Russian speakers look at a computer screen where an image was shown of three blocks stacked in a triangle. The top block always matched one of the two bottom blocks, and all blocks appeared in one of twenty different shades of what an English speaker would call blue, and what a Russian speaker would call either goluboy or siniy. Subjects were asked to hit a button once they had identified the matching block. The results showed that Russian speakers could distinguish between dark and light shades of blue 10% faster than English speakers could. This suggests language categories do indeed affect color perception, at least to a minor degree.

In fact, our perceptions of color may change over time if there is a change in linguistic environment. In Greek, as in Russian, there are two different terms used to describe light and dark blue. However, one study showed that after living for long periods of time in the United Kingdom, where English lumps ghalazio and ble into the larger category of blue, Greek speakers begin to see these two colors as more similar.

How does color enter language?

When we consider the differences in color categories across languages, the way we divide up the color spectrum may seem rather arbitrary. And in fact, this was believed to be the case until a groundbreaking study done by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in 1969. Their research showed that colors enter language in a fixed order. If a language only has two color terms, they will equate to 'black,' or dark hues, and 'white,' or light hues. This doesn't mean speakers of such languages are unable to see the full spectrum of colors. But their categories are broader than ours. The third color to enter language is always red, which may include colors that are further delineated in English, such as orange. Next follows either yellow or green, with the other being the fifth term. So, if a language has just five color categories, they will always be black, white, red, yellow, and green. Finally, blue and then brown enter the color lexicon.

Most languages have between two and eleven basic color categories. And yet, some – including Bellonese, Mursi, Pirahã, Warlpiri, Kalam, and Yele – have none. Rather than using color as a principal category for dividing up the world, they focus on other

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characteristics, such as pattern, ripeness, brightness, translucence, humidity, shape, or location. Where an English speaker might say, "I hate brown bananas," they might say, "I hate ripe bananas," or, "I hate soft bananas." It's not that they are unaware that a ripe banana is brown, but that color is not the preferred method of interpreting the physical world.

Language as a focus, not a limit

When the theory of linguistic relativity was first developed in the 1920s, it suggested that language places limits on what we are capable of understanding and conceptualizing. That hypothesis has been rejected in favor of another: language does not restrain us, but rather creates categorical patterns of focus. For example, in Spanish, it's impossible to render the sentence, "My friend is coming over," without specifying the gender of that friend. People, as well as objects, are inextricably linked to gender. Since both are prominent features of any language, gender thus becomes a categorical focus for speakers of Spanish. Similarly, in English, all sentences are produced with a time marker. I either have to say, "My friend came over," "My friend is here," or "My friend is coming over." In Chinese, and other languages that mark time not with tense changes but with time phrases, such as 'yesterday,' 'in an hour,' or 'next year,' the topic of time can just as easily be included as excluded from a conversation.

In the same way, color is a category that is used in varying degrees to classify experience and perception. In languages such as English, which uses all 11 basic color terms, color seems to be more central to our experience. Compare that to speakers of languages like Mursi or Yele, where color terminology does not exist despite speakers' ability to see different colors. Language, it's becoming clearer, affects where our attention is drawn to, not what we are able to perceive, understand, or conceptualize.

New Staff Profile: Zainab Haidari

Zainab is the newest interpreter in the UCDH Farsi, Dari, Pashto interpreting team. Zainab was born in Afghanistan, and came to the United States in 2016. 10 days after arriving to the United States, Zainab began working as an interpreter to help those in her community. Zainab has been working as an interpreter for 6 years, and has worked with different private companies. In addition to being a full-time interpreter, Zainab also attends school as a full-time student. The difficulties that Zainab has endured working as a full-time interpreter and being a full-time student, have allowed Zainab to grow and become a stronger person.

Since childhood, Zainab knew that her calling in life was to help people in any possible way. She feels passionate about her job as an interpreter and is determined to pursue a career in medicine. She currently holds an Associate degree in math and science and is an undergraduate medical student. What she likes the most about her job is the opportunity to assist others and learn medical terminology.

Zainab does not have much free time because of her busy schedule with school and work. Therefore, she cherishes every moment that she can spend with her friends and family. She enjoys going out on trips with them, watching movies and playing group games.

Welcome to MIS, Zainab! We are happy to have you as a part of our team!

UC DAVIS HEALTH

This issue was produced by UC Davis Health Medical Interpreting Services Department's editorial team.
https://health.ucdavis.edu/interpreting_services/

Questions? Comments?
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