

SPOT LIGHT

Dear Dr Nighat

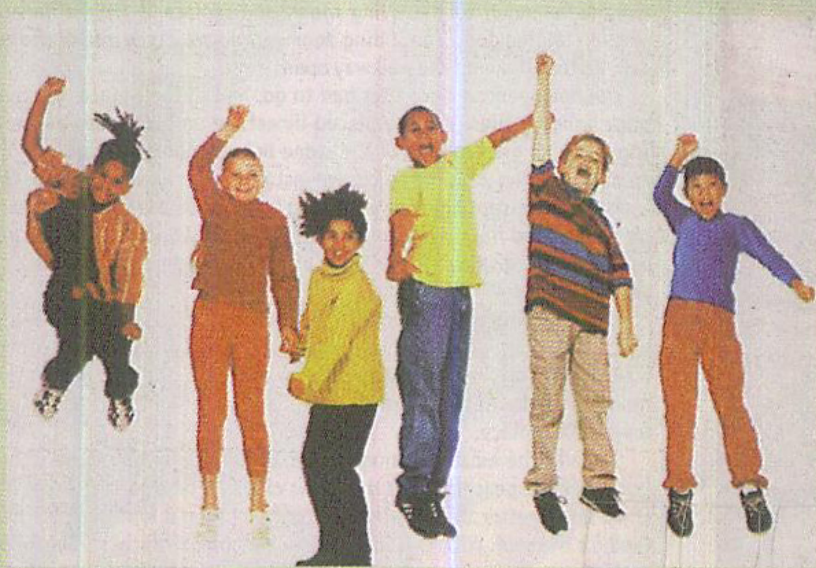
Thanks for your detailed information on Autism. Where are the schools located in Dhaka. Can you give me the address.

Thanks, Tushar Biswas

This was a letter sent to us for our 'Interpreter of Maladies' column, and we felt that such an important issue deserved a fuller treatment, so this week, we have a special feature on autism.

Children in the Dark

Is Autism Out to Get Them?



THE English Philosopher Frances Bacon once said, "Knowledge itself is power". When it comes to autism, we fall short of this knowledge. We fall short of power. It is thus not unusual to ask what autism is. Autism is a complex disorder, with its causes and cures still at large. Nonetheless, a recent article in the *Time* magazine reveals several intriguing aspects of this disorder. But a crucial question to ask is, given its widespread prevalence in the western countries (roughly 1 out of 166 children in America), whether Bangladesh is under threat?

The difficulty concerning autism primarily stems from the fact that it comes in numerous forms. It can be exhibited in varying degrees, with different sets of syndromes. Some autistic children are hypersensitive to visuals and sound, while others may be "robotic" and seemingly void of emotional engagements. The wide range of autistic behaviour can be demonstrated by the autistic spectrum, stretching from mild to full-blown autism. Traditionally, Bangladesh-lacking in the requisite knowledge and the resources- improperly diagnosed these children as mentally retarded. Even in countries like the UK and the US, autism was a wholly novel concept in the late 1990s.

This, however, has not prevented the researchers and the medical experts from speculating. "Indeed, most researchers believe autism arises from a combination of genetic vulnerabilities. An identical twin of a child with autism has a 60% to 90% chance of also being affected." There

are also others who believe that the root causes are a combination of environmental factors. It is now agreed that- to make situations worse- autism has no singular cause, but may result from a large number of factors interacting with each other. The "mix" of these factors primarily varies within the autistic spectrum.

On the other hand, the prevalence rate is accelerating. Rakhi Barua of Centre for Disability for Development (CDD) indicates that in Bangladesh no substantial research nor survey has taken place as yet. These research projects demand much expertise and funding, both of which the country lacks. Although institutions such as the Dhaka University Psychology Department have shown interest, it is the uncertainty of success that hinder potential investors- ie, there is always a large risk of failure and a significant volume of money at stake.

As a result, the research hypotheses and findings of other countries are being made use of. As mentioned before, a comprehensive survey has yet to take place to determine the prevalence of autism in Bangladesh. However it may be convenient to look into the statistics of India, which is believed to illustrate the situation of the Indian subcontinent. Fortunately, with a 1 out of 500 rate, we lag behind many developed nations like Denmark, Finland, the US and the UK. Nevertheless, this must not be misunderstood. Firstly, the actual figure for Bangladesh remains to be determined. Second, the rates are rising rapidly.

So, what facilities are available in Bangladesh? CDD is an information and

resource center for the mentally and physically challenged. The majority of the country's relevant activities are channeled through CDD. It offers training in a variety of fields relating to disability and creates forums for awareness on general disability. Its website, www.cdd.org.bd, indicates that its vision is equal opportunities and mutual respect, and to develop creativity and professionalism amongst the disabled.

Unfortunately, there are almost no institutions that deal exclusively with autism. Among the very few schools for autistic children, is Society for the Welfare of Autistic Children (SWAC) situated at 6/2, Block-B, Lalmatia, phone no-8118836. It was founded by a group of parents who felt the need to take action. Mrs. Sabrina Hossain, the Joint Secretary of SWAC said: "I myself as a parent was not aware of autism and that my son was suffering from it. There was no organisation to provide aid. So, a group of us parents decided to come together to secure the welfare of not only our children but also other children."

When asked how SWAC deals with autistic children, she said that there are two ways. Firstly, subject to vacancy, a child diagnosed with autism may be admitted. There are 9 classrooms and 58 students. The current student to teacher ratio is 2:1. Second, if a place is not available, it offers a package program. This involves counselling/ educating the parents, and providing them with guidelines for stay-at-home care.

It is said that for autism, awareness and parental intervention is of prime importance at an early stage. SWAC is regularly writing on the issue in a number of newspapers, and undertaking awareness workshops and campaigns.

The universal method, used in such schools is the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) system, whereby alterations to the behaviour are brought about with "carefully repeated drills and rewards".

New innovations in the field of autism include the DIR method that focuses on the expression of emotional and spontaneous thinking. There are also programs such as the Teak Method and the Sunrise Program that emphasise on behaviour and communication. As of yet, these have not been implemented. "These are still going through the trial and error stage. ABA remains the universal method of teaching these children," maintains Sabrina Hossain.

HOROSCOPE



ARIES

(Mar. 21-April 19)

Be careful not to divulge secret information this week. If you have to deal with large institutions, be careful not to make waves. Your mate may want to pick a fight but if you're persistent with your affections their anger should dissipate. Help those incapable of taking care of their personal affairs. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



TAURUS

(Apr. 20-May 20)

Upheavals may occupy your day. You can make some money if you get involved in a conservative financial prospect that is presented to you. Take the time to do your job correctly or you may find yourself looking for a new one. You mustn't give too much to your children. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



GEMINI

(May 21-June 21)

Uncertainties regarding relatives will make situations uncomfortable if you attend a family function. Read some books on self awareness. Reciprocate by offering helpful hints. Real estate investments could be prosperous. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



CANCER

(June 22-July 22)

All your energy should be directed into moneymaking opportunities. Look into ways to better yourself through improving your dietary habits and daily routines. Romantic encounters will develop through colleagues. Do not let lovers cost you money or take advantage of you. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



LEO

(July 23-Aug 22)

You can meet friends who will let you know how valuable you are. Accept the inevitable and continue to do your job. If you can include them in your plans, do so. Partnerships may be plentiful. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.



VIRGO

(Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

Love could develop at social events that are work relate. Double check your work and be sure that your boss is in a good mood before you do your presentation. You may not be happy if members of your family are not pulling their weight. Renovations or purchases made for your home will payoff. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



LIBRA

(Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Discuss your objectives with partners or peers. Stay out of other people's affairs. Your ability to get the job done will result in added responsibility and possible promotion. Uncertainties regarding your home and family are evident. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



SCORPIO

(Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

You could expand your circle of friends if you get involved in unusual activities. You may be in an extremely passionate mood this week. Your reputation may be at stake if you partake in gossip. Be sure to look into travel opportunities that will provide you with mental stimulation. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



SAGITTARIUS

(Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Help children complete projects they're having difficulty with. You may as well work on projects that will allow you to make progress. Hobbies will be good for your emotional well being. Take the time to close deals that have been up in the air. Your lucky day this week will be Thursday.



CAPRICORN

(Dec. 22-Jan. 20)

Empty promises could be likely where work is concerned. Try not to argue about trivial matters. Your lack of attention may have been a factor. Some time spent with that special someone should be your intent. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



AQUARIUS

(Jan. 21-Feb. 19)

Don't let your emotions interfere with moneymaking deals. Problems on the home front might be a little disconcerting. You can ask for favors but don't take them for granted. You will have a problem sorting out your true feelings when it comes to your relationship. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



PISCES

(Feb. 20-March 20)

The personal problems you may be having are interfering with your productivity. Overindulgence will mean poor health. You can sell your ideas to those who have the money to back them. Don't jump as quickly as you usually do. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

NEWS FLASH

amarSports.com gives Bangladeshi flavour in FIFA World Cup 2006

amarSports.com is designed to satisfy the sports fever of Bangladeshi people at home and abroad. The site is quite dynamic with latest FIFA World Cup 2006 results, news and photos from the World Cup matches. The website amarSports.com is updated at least 2-3 times a day. Visitors can browse through the pages of the site to find out all the information about the played matches with group standings. As soon as the World Cup rolls on to the second stage, the knockout round, the site will be updated accordingly. amarSports.com offers all the upcoming match schedules with TV info, which TV channel will broadcast the matches live in Bangladesh/ USA/ UK/ Canada/ Australia. The developer of the site, MNHs e-Solutions Ltd strongly claims that a five minute visit to the site is enough to get visitors' attention confidence and satisfaction.



PHOTO: AFP