

Mind & Body Connection

MBH Leads National Training Initiative for Psychiatrists

Over two percent of people in the United States have a neurodevelopmental disorder such as autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disability. There are few psychiatrists, however, with expertise in caring for this population. “You can be well trained in child psychiatry but have had little exposure to youth with autism and other developmental disorders. Centers across the country are all recruiting for physicians, but find it difficult to fill the positions,” said Dr. Matthew Siegel, Director of the Developmental Disorders Program of Maine Behavioral Healthcare and Faculty Scientist at the Maine Medical Center Research Institute.

Dr. Siegel, with Dr. Kelly McGuire, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at MBH’s Center for Autism and Developmental Disorders (CADD) specializing in the population, have led a national association of academic centers in developing a fellowship training program to increase the number of psychiatrists who can diagnose, assess and treat these youth. “We can offer advanced fellowship training, just like other sub-specialty areas, such as addiction or forensics,” explained Dr. Siegel. In addition to MBH, there are currently five other academic institutions offering this non-accredited sub-specialty fellowship. “Almost all fellowships in medicine have started as non-accredited,



Dr. Tamara Palka, Kelly McGuire and Matt Siegel

taking about ten to fifteen years to become fully recognized and certified as a sub-specialty.”

Founded by Dr. Siegel, and now chaired by Dr. McGuire, this association grew from a workgroup of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP). The six sites in the association have identified core educational objectives and outlined parameters for a robust training experience. The fellows evaluate and treat a large number of children with developmental disorders who have emotional or behavioral problems, under the tutelage of doctors and clinicians who have years of experience, during a 12-month apprenticeship. This provides a broad training in all areas, including occupational and speech therapy, special

Continues next page

education assessments, and diagnostic evaluations.

“Psychiatrists need to be able to understand the overall treatment plan in order to coordinate the management of a complex condition,” said Dr. Siegel. “Psychiatrists need a deeper understanding of autism and other developmental disorders to be able to diagnose and treat related psychiatric conditions.” Dr. Siegel gives the example of challenges presented when treating a nonverbal child with autism. “Without any measurement instruments for this, you have to gain a special understanding of autism to help understand what is atypical. What might be signs of depression, for instance? Is he or she more irritable or withdrawn than normal? If you understand the condition, you can interpret behaviors that are outside

the norm, and use our emerging understanding of neurobiology to find the best response.”

A more definitive treatment means physicians have the ability to treat the disorder earlier. A proper assessment can provide access to the right therapies and education, and possibly prevent long-term impairment. “If a child suffers from acute anxiety or depression or has unpredictable aggression, for example, he or she may not be able to participate in education or treatment, and this can have a long-term impact on their life trajectory.” Children and adolescents have a finite period to receive critical educational experiences and treatments. We can’t lose those years to untreated depression, self injury or aggression.”

To learn more about the training program, contact Dr. Siegel at siegem@mainebehavioralhealthcare.org or Dr. McGuire at kmcguirem@mainebehavioralhealthcare.org