

// 2 ND APRIL 2008 - FIRST WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY



Last December, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution under the initiative of the State of Qatar, which declares April 2 as World Autism Awareness Day. Autism is indeed today a very serious education and health issue around the world.

On the occasion of the first International Day on Autism on 2 April 2008, Autism Europe issued a statement addressed to the EU Member States and the Council of Europe :

The Member States of European Union and the Council of Europe should pay a particular attention to autism considering the high prevalence of this disability.

On the basis of evidenced scientific data, we know today that autism is not a rare condition and if the whole spectrum of autistic disorders is considered, the disability can affect 0.6% of the population. This means that Europe (including all members of the Council of Europe) counts around 5 million people with autism.

Autism is a significant lifelong disability, due to multiple medical causes, interfering with the normal development and functioning of the brain, sometimes identifiable in very early childhood. Autism deeply affects the way the person communicates and relates with his or her environment. This disability affects the vital areas of psychological and behavioural development, generally through the life span.

Autism can affect any family, regardless of ethnic or social class, and it is four times more frequent in males than in females.

The Member States of European Union and the Council of Europe should pay a particular attention to the respect of their dignity and their human rights

For guaranteeing their full dignity, people with autism should not be considered nor treated as a population that is not able to achieve goals such as independence and self-determination.

People with autism have of course the same human value as anyone else and as such, have the same human rights. In particular, people with autism must benefit from all same rights as those which must be preserved and defended for all people with disabilities.

But, because of the complexity of their needs, they form an especially vulnerable group even among disabled persons. As underlined by the Council of Europe, people with autism are often the subject of more serious discriminations.

Indeed, and in spite of the availability of good models, most persons with autism do not benefit from scientific, medical, educational and social progress made during the last decades in reference to this disability. As a consequence, people with autism are still, in great majority, deprived from personalised specialised education and treatment which would permit them to truly improve.

This deprivation generates much suffering and additional difficulties, and constitutes a form of discrimination that Autism-Europe is strongly committed to fight against.

Autism-Europe requests that the Member States pay a particular attention to adapted care and education for people with autism under this rights-based approach.

No person with autism should be deprived of the freedom to develop his or her own way of life in a way as independent a way as possible.

The development of their unique potential depends more on the availability of suitable, early, comprehensive and lifelong support than on the degree of individual impairment.

- Suitable, early, comprehensive and lifelong support requests positive actions and active measures to be put in place by the national systems.

- Member States must ensure that persons with autism have access to appropriate and early diagnosis and treatment, "in accordance with internationally accepted medical standards". People with autism must also have access to the ordinary healthcare services and receive the care that is appropriate to their health needs, in accordance with the same standards afforded to other persons.

- Member States must ensure that persons with autism receive appropriate education all life long. For people with autism, education represents a lot more than a basic right. Education is indispensable to compensate for the great difficulties that people with autism have in extracting meaning from simple experiences, something most other people are capable of without specific educational support. Children with autism should be referred for free appropriate education from pre-school age. A specialized educational approach should engage the pupil in developmentally appropriate educational activities, on the sole basis of the child's best interest, strengths and needs. The priorities of the family should always be taken into account. Adults with autism should benefit from a continuing education to reach as far as possible an independent way of life and to be included in work.

Autism-Europe considers that in Europe - but also outside Europe - there is an urgent need for sharing knowledge and best practices between countries for achieving these goals. Autism-Europe requests that the Member share and adopt these best practices.

Extract of the statement of the UN Secretary General H.E. Ban Ki-moon Statement about World Autism Awareness Day

"On this day, the United Nations reaffirms its commitment to the rights and wellbeing of people with disabilities – a commitment rooted in our fundamental principle of universal human rights for all. Throughout its history, the United Nations family has promoted the rights and well-being of the disabled, including children with developmental disabilities. It is especially fitting that this inaugural Day falls in 2008 – the year in which we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration for Human Rights, and expect to see the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the General Assembly in 2006.

As we advance the universal human rights of children with disabilities, let us focus on building enabling environments for them to prosper as future members of their communities, citizens of their countries and as fully-fledged members of the global community. Let us pay tribute to the courage of children with autism and their families, as they strive every day to confront the disability with a powerful combination of determination, creativity and hope. Let us empower them and respond to their needs today, so as to make our societies more accessible, enabling and empowering for all our children tomorrow."

