

Against *Le Packing*: A Consensus Statement

To the Editor:

**C**oinciding with the Ninth International Autism–Europe Congress held in Catania, Sicily from October 8 through 10, 2010, the undersigned keynote speakers of the meeting, a group of recognized professionals in the field, were greatly disturbed by the news that in some areas of the world—notably francophone countries—an alleged form of therapy labeled *le packing* is being applied and recommended for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders, especially those showing associated severe behavioral problems.<sup>1</sup>

This alleged therapy consists of wrapping the patient (wearing only underclothes or naked in the case of young children) several times a week during weeks or months in towels soaked in cold water (10°C to 15°C). The individual is wrapped with blankets to help the body warm up in a process lasting 45 minutes, during which time the child or adolescent is accompanied by two to four staff persons. The alleged goal of this technique, as defined by proponents of this therapy, is to “allow the child to rid him- or herself progressively of its pathological defense mechanisms against archaic anxieties,”<sup>2</sup> by achieving “a greater perception and integration of the body, and a growing sense of containment.”<sup>3</sup> The French Public Health High Council, although purposely avoiding reviewing indications and ethical aspects, has recently established that, although psychological risks have not been excluded, performing *le packing* does not carry risks that would justify its prohibition.<sup>4</sup>

We have reached the consensus that practitioners and families around the world should consider this approach unethical. Furthermore, this “therapy” ignores current knowledge about autism spectrum disorders; goes against evidence-based practice parameters and treatment guidelines published in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Hungary, and Australia<sup>5–7</sup>; and, in our view, poses a risk of preventing these children and adolescents from accessing their basic human rights to health and education.

David Amaral, Ph.D.  
Sally J. Rogers, Ph.D.  
The M.I.N.D. Institute  
University of California Davis  
Sacramento, CA

Simon Baron-Cohen, Ph.D.  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, UK

Thomas Bourgeron, Ph.D.  
University Denis Diderot Paris 7  
Institute Pasteur  
Paris, France

Ernesto Caffo, M.D.  
University of Modena  
Reggio Emilia  
Modena, Italy

Eric Fombonne, M.D.  
McGill University Health Center  
Montreal, Canada

Joaquin Fuentes, M.D.  
Policlínica Gipuzkoa  
GAUTENA  
San Sebastian, Spain

Patricia Howlin, Ph.D.  
Michael Rutter, M.D., F.R.C.P.  
Institute of Psychiatry  
King's College London  
London, UK

Ami Klin, Ph.D.  
Fred Volkmar, M.D.  
Yale Child Study Center  
New Haven, CT

Catherine Lord, Ph.D.  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, MI

Nancy Minshew, M.D.  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, PA

Franco Nardocci, M.D.  
Regional Program for Autism (PRIA)  
Region Emilia-Romagna, Italy

Giacomo Rizzolatti, Ph.D.  
University of Parma  
Parma, Italy

Sebastiano Russo, M.D.  
Regional Program for Autism  
Sicily, Italy

Renato Scifo, M.D.  
Acireale Hospital  
ASD Centre  
Catania, Italy

Rutger Jan van der Gaag, M.D.  
University Medical Center  
St. Radboud, The Netherlands

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## Asperger Disorder in the DSM-V: Sacrificing Utility for Validity

### To the Editor:

The draft criteria of the upcoming *DSM-V* have proposed creating a single diagnostic category of autism spectrum disorder that would include autism, Asperger disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. Disintegrative disorder and Rett disorder will be eliminated. However, it is the “disappearance” of Asperger disorder that is likely to create the most confusion.

According to the *DSM-V*, studies have not demonstrated the validity of the subtypes of *DSM-IV*, especially that of Asperger disorder. It has been claimed that distinctions made among the subtypes of autism spectrum disorder have been found to be “inconsistent over time, variable across sites” and associated with the level of

intelligence and verbal skills rather than with the core features of the disorder.<sup>1</sup>

The main reason most studies have not been able to distinguish between Asperger disorder and autism is that the *DSM-IV* criteria were vague and difficult to use. For example, language delay was not clearly defined and differences in the social deficits of the two conditions were not highlighted. As a result, most studies chose to modify the diagnostic criteria or abandon them altogether. Publication of the *DSM-V* provides an opportunity to revise and refine the diagnosis. Instead, we seem to have decided to go back to *DSM-III*, lumping all autistic disorders into a single category, replacing only *pervasive developmental* with *autism spectrum*. Although the *DSM-IV* has been accused of trying to “carve at the joints,”<sup>1</sup> the *DSM-V* appears to have chosen not even to “use the knife.”

The decision to include Asperger disorder under the overarching label of *autism spectrum disorder* is likely to cause problems and should be reconsidered. Not every diagnosis proposed in the upcoming revision has been shown to be valid or useful, such as binge eating and minor cognitive problem.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not it is distinct from autism, *Asperger disorder* has become a clinically useful term to describe certain types of individuals who may respond to a different set of interventions than those with typical autism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, naming the condition has increased awareness of the milder forms of autism and resulted in the creation of specialist services.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of biological markers, therefore, the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders should be based not only on diagnostic validity but also on clinical utility.

Mohammad Ghaziuddin, M.D.

University of Michigan

Ann Arbor, MI

mghaziud@umich.edu

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