

'Putting the Pieces Together'

As *Interim Chair* for the Psychiatry Department at Lawrence & Memorial, Dr. Amarilis Talavera-Briggs looks for ways to improve the health of healthcare.

In her field of child psychiatry, for example, when she learned of the sharp increase in the number of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), she took action and organized a symposium to help educate the professionals in this area.

Her program, 'The Autism Puzzle: Putting the Pieces Together,' attracted 150 attendees. The panelists – and attendees – represented various disciplines, such as physicians, nurses, counselors, occupational and physical therapists and speech pathologists and audiologists.

The guest speaker, Dr. Steven Shore, had Asperger's Syndrome also known as high functioning autism. Dr. Shore described to the audience how he overcame the odds to earn his doctorate, became a professor and authored a book "Understanding Autism for Dummies." The keynote speaker, Dr. Fred Volkmar, directs the Yale Child Study Center and is a national authority in the field.

"The goal of the symposium was to have experts in different disciplines share their wealth of knowledge, recent research and resources so that the professionals in this area would be better equipped to provide services to this population. We can provide better services only if we fully understand the health issues we are facing," said Dr. Talavera-Briggs, who said it is a long-term goal of hers to establish a centralized location for the evaluation and treatment of childhood ASD in Southeastern Connecticut. "We have many of the services needed for this project available now through the psychiatry and rehabilitation departments. Additionally, a developmental pediatrician, a neuropsychologist and an applied behavioral analyst would need to join this team."

Jennifer Lombardo, rehabilitative



Dr. Amarilis Talavera-Briggs, interim chair for psychiatry, works to improve care for those children diagnosed with autism.

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services manager at Pequot Health Center, helped plan the symposium, and she praised Dr. Talavera-Briggs for seeing a problem and going after a solution.

"What Dr. Talavera-Briggs has been trying to do is get everyone on the same page and ultimately improve the services we offer to the community," she said.

Therapists from rehabilitative services work regularly with autistic children and they have joined High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Camp in Old Lyme in an outreach program where the therapists monitor ASD children while they groom and ride horses.

Dr. Talavera-Briggs evaluates children and adolescents with this disorder at The Counseling Center and also supervises the clinicians that provide therapy for high-functioning autistic patients and their families. She said

that there is no clear answer as to the recent increase in the rate of autism.

"It may be that there are environmental factors at play, but research has shown that there is a genetic linkage to the condition, and we are now better able to identify younger and milder cases with a more inclusive diagnostic criteria," said Dr. Talavera-Briggs, who explained that ASD are lifelong neurological conditions that have no known cure. The patients have a spectrum of presentations from mild/high functioning (Asperger's Syndrome) to severe deficits of autism. Even when high functioning, the patients have social skills delay, difficulties with speech and transitions and limited focus of interest.

At L&M, Lombardo said the rehabilitative staff sees all degrees of autism, but it is always best for a child's therapy if diagnosis is made early. "It is a lot better if we can begin working with a child when he or she is three years old instead of eight," she said.

Autism remains a condition that is not completely understood, but at L&M, bringing psychiatry and rehabilitative therapists together is the first step to improve care for area families.