

Wednesday, Nov 11, 2015

Does your physician know autism? ASD in the health care system

Oakland medical student Kristin Totoraitis volunteered for OUCARES, the outreach services division of the Oakland University Center for Autism, when she was an undergraduate.

Totoraitis, who is in her third year in the Oakland University William Beaumont (OUWB) School of Medicine, fell in love with the program, and now helps with a volleyball program out of the center.

Hoping to make a difference in the lives of those with autism in the health care system, Totoraitis also chose to research whether health care professionals need increased education in their interaction with individuals on the autism spectrum.

She will be presenting the results of her research on Thursday, Nov. 12, during the OUCARES-sponsored "Does Your Physician Speak Autism?" Evening Enrichment event, which will run from 6-7:30 p.m. in Room 204 of O'Dowd Hall.

Totoraitis conducted the research as part of an OUWB Capstone Project under the guidance of Mary Dereski, associate professor in OUWB's Department of Biomedical Sciences

During the event, Dereski will facilitate and present along with Totoraitis and host a panel also featuring physicians, a behavioral specialist a parent. In an open discussion, the panel will touch on subjects that include:

- Issues related to young adults with autism
- Research results showing physician awareness of the needs of young adults with high functioning autism
- Areas of need in clinical setting identified by these individuals and their caregivers
- How to best address the findings for the benefit of patients

Totoraitis said her studies have shown that there's a need for increased education of individuals in the healthcare field and that there are specific needs of young adults with ASD when they go to their physician's office.

Through her research, Totoraitis conducted surveys with young adults with ASD, their caregivers and physicians, and found that 91 percent of parents surveyed still regularly help their young adult children or ward with their health care needs. She also learned that when young adults and their caregivers visit their doctor, only 61 percent of them feel there is an understanding that the individual with ASD has specific health care needs.

"Parents are experts on their children, so if they're saying there needs to be increased education, there should be," said Totoraitis. "They're seeing the deficits more than anyone."

Beaumont Physician Stefani Hines, also an assistant professor for OUWB, will also be on the panel. Hines said the results do not necessarily surprise her, because physicians who get more exposure to autism during their training are likely those working with children, since childhood is when autism usually is noticed.

"We are just now getting a feel for autism 'all grown up,'" Hines said. "I think heightened awareness of autism and the huge spectrum, as well as tips for dealing with patients with ASD, would be of tremendous benefit for all physicians, regardless of specialty."

Hines said she's looking forward to the Enrichment Event, which will also feature Board Certified Behavior Analyst Jamie McGillivray, who has been in the field for about 20 years, and Dr. George Mellos is a child psychiatrist with about 35 years' experience.

Another Beaumont physician, general internal medicine specialist Dr. Michael Barnes, was also invited on the panel to give parents a perspective on what would help physicians care for patients on the autism spectrum.

"I am hopeful that I can help parents understand that many physicians don't 'speak autism' and having the parents prepare physicians in their offices for caring for their adult children with autism can be very helpful for everyone," said Barnes.



Mary Dereski, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Biomedical Sciences for OUWB works with a student.