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Children with autism can display a bewildering range of strange behaviours and obsessions

The autism myth

Everyone knows this disturbing disorder is reaching epidemic proportions. But all may not be what it seems, says **Graham Lawton**

RICHARD Miles will never forget the winter of 1989. The 34-year-old company director and his family spent that Christmas on the island of Jersey in the English Channel, where he had grown up. It was also then that he first noticed something was badly wrong with his 14-month-old son Robert. The bright, sociable child, who had already started talking, became drowsy and unsteady on his feet. Then he started bumping into furniture. Within weeks his language had dried up and he would no longer make eye contact. "It was as if the lights went out," says Miles. His son was eventually diagnosed with autism.

Miles, who now campaigns for more research into autism, is convinced that his son is part of an autism epidemic. Ten years ago, he points out, Jersey had just three autistic children in special-needs education. It now has 69. Robert was one of a cluster of nine children on the island diagnosed around the same time.

Similar rises have been reported across the world, from Australia to the US, and from Denmark to China. Back in the 1970s, specialists would typically see four or five cases of autism in a population of 10,000. Today they routinely find 40, 50 or even 60 cases. Perhaps the starkest illustration of autism's relentless rise comes from California. In 2003, the state authorities stunned the world when they announced that over the previous 16 years, the number of people receiving health or education services for autism had risen more than sixfold. The world's media went into overdrive.

What could be causing so many children to lose their footing on a normal developmental trajectory and crash-land into the nightmare world of autism? The change has occurred too suddenly to be genetic in origin, which points to some environmental factor. But what? There is no shortage of suspects. In the UK, blame is often laid at the door of the combined measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine. In the US, mercury added to a range of childhood shots has been accused. Food allergies, viral infections, antibiotics and other prescription drugs have all been fingered, often by campaign groups run by mystified and angry parents. The problem is that none of these suggested causes has any solid scientific evidence to support it (see "The usual suspects", p 40).

Perhaps there's a simple explanation for this: there is no autism epidemic. On the face of it that sounds ridiculous – just look at the figures. But talk to almost any autism researcher and they will point to other explanations for the rise in numbers. Some say it's still an open question, but others are adamant that the autism epidemic is a complete myth. And if the most recent research is anything to go by, they could be right. Studies designed to track the supposedly increasing prevalence of autism are coming to the conclusion that, in actual fact, there is no increase at all. "There is no epidemic,"

As diagnoses of autism in California have soared, the state has increased treatment services



says Brent Taylor, professor of community child health at University College London.

Autism is a developmental disorder sometimes noticeable from a few months of age but not usually diagnosed until a child is 3 or 4 years old. It is characterised by communication problems, difficulty in socialising and a lack of imagination (see "What is autism", p 39). It is not a single disorder, but comes in many forms, which merge into other disorders and eventually into "normality". There is no biochemical or genetic test, so diagnosis has to be made by observing behaviour. Autistic children also often have other medical conditions, such as hyperactivity, Tourette's syndrome, anxiety and depression. The upshot is that "one person's autism is not another person's autism," says epidemiologist Jim Gurney of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

In recognition of this ambiguity, autism is considered part of a continuum within a broader class of so-called "pervasive developmental disorders" (PDDs) – basically any serious abnormality in a child's development. Autism itself is divided into three categories: autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome (sometimes called "high-functioning autism"), and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), sometimes called mild or atypical autism. Together these three make up the autistic spectrum disorders.

Confused? You're not the only one. The difficulty of placing children with developmental problems on this spectrum has led to several major shifts in the way