Autistic role modelling in medical education

Sebastian C. K. Shaw, Bernadette Grosjean, Sue McCowan, Malcolm Kinnear, Mary Doherty

1Sebastian C. K. Shaw (corresponding author)
Title: Honorary Clinical Lecturer
Institution: Department of Medical Education, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Brighton, East Sussex, UK.
Email: S.Shaw2@bsms.ac.uk

2Bernadette Grosjean
Email: bernaharbor@yahoo.com
Institution: N/A – Independent scholar.

3Sue McCowan
Email: s.mccowan@nhs.net
Institution: Sherborne Community Mental Health Team, Dorset Healthcare University NHS Foundation Trust, UK

4Malcolm Kinnear
Email: malcolm.kinnear@nhs.scot
Institution: NHS Fife, UK.

5Mary Doherty
Email: drmdoherty@gmail.com
Institution: Our Lady’s Hospital, Navan, Ireland

Word count: 547

Acknowledgements: None.

Declaration of interest: None.

Funding: Not applicable.

Key Words: Autism; Neurodiversity; Medical education; Role models.
Autistic role modelling in medical education

Autism was traditionally associated with a tragedy narrative (1). However, autistic advocates have strived to reframe societal views of autism over the past few decades, highlighting the many strengths and successes of autistic individuals. Perhaps the most notable and widely impactful example of this was Jim Sinclair’s 1993 essay, “don’t mourn for us” (2). Over recent years there has been growing interest in autistic medical students and doctors. Despite the fantastic work of the aforementioned advocates, the ability of autistic individuals to be successful medical practitioners and educators remains a novel concept to many doctors (3). Misunderstandings, such as the belief that autistic people lack in empathy or communication skills, can and have led to reports of discriminatory practice in general practice training within the United Kingdom (3). More broadly, medical educators have recently begun to consider the teaching and support of medical students who may be autistic (4). There is, however, a propensity towards a deficit-focussed approach and there remains a distinct lack of an autistic voice within the medical literature. In the spirit of the well-known ‘nothing about us without us’ movement, we begin to tackle this here.

Positive role modelling brings an array of benefits not only to those with disabilities but to their relatives, colleagues and society in general. Whilst, in keeping with a neurodiversity approach, we strive to promote autism as a difference, not purely a disability, the low prevalence and deficit-focussed teaching/diagnostics draw obvious comparisons in terms of autistic learner wellbeing (5). Jongenelen found that the existence of positive role models for disabled individuals provided a source of both motivation and inspiration, whilst also improving self-esteem (6). This may provide students and trainees with a frame of reference. It may also help to alleviate feelings of shame or the imposter phenomenon. Witnessing colleagues with whom we can identify and being able to learn from their successes and struggles may make the difference between leaving a career we dreamed of, or pursuing it, more aware of our strengths, our vulnerabilities and the right to advocate for accommodations – enabling autistic doctors to bring their unique perspectives to the profession. The lack of an openly autistic voice in the existing literature is therefore problematic and there is a need for increased advocacy, disclosure and role modelling.

We are a group of autistic doctors who strive to promote positive advocacy and support. We represent a group called Autistic Doctors International, consisting of over 400 doctors who identify as autistic. Our sibling group, Autistic Med Students, includes over 100 further members from around the globe. We have members working in a wide range of specialties, spread across most continents, with general practice being our largest specialty sub-group. We provide a safe space for peer support, autism advocacy, and relevant academic exploits. New members typically report having never met or, in some cases, heard of other autistic doctors / medical students. Through our “coming out” here, we hope that this letter may not only add an autistic voice to the growing academic discourse in this area, but also provide a sense of positive role modelling – showing autistic students and trainees that they can both survive and thrive within the medical profession. For any autistic medical students or doctors who wish to join us, please do make contact.

**Acknowledgements:** None.
**Declaration of interest:** None.

**Key Words:** Autism; Autistic; Neurodiversity; Medical education; Role models.

**References:**