

Communication Barriers and Challenges for Accessing Autism Care: Conventional Versus Alternative Medicine

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Abstract : Despite the widespread use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) for autistic children, little is known about the communication flow between the different parties involved in autism care (e.g., parents/caregivers, conventional providers, alternative practitioners). This study aimed to describe how communication occurs through the first year following an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis to identify challenges and potential barriers to communication within the healthcare system in Ottawa, Canada. From an ecological perspective, we collected qualitative data through 12 semi-structured interviews with six parents/caregivers, three conventional providers (e.g., family doctor, neurodevelopmental pediatrician, psychologist), and three alternative practitioners (e.g., naturopath, occupational therapist, speech and language pathologist) operating in Ottawa. We interpreted the data using thematic analysis. Findings revealed communication challenges between the parents/caregivers and conventional providers while they experience better communication flow with fewer challenges in alternative care settings. However, parents/caregivers are the only links between the health professionals of both streams. From the five contexts examined: organizational, interpersonal, media, cultural, and political-legal, we found four themes (provider knowledge, care integration, flexible care, and time constraints) underlining specific barriers to communication flow between the parties involved in the care of autistic children. The increasing interest in alternative medicine is forcing changes in the healthcare system. Communications occur outside the norms making openings for better communication and information-sharing increasingly essential. Within the identified themes in the current study, the necessity for better communication between all parties involved in the care of autistic children is evident. More ASD and CAM-related training for providers would support effective parent/caregiver-provider communication. The findings of the current study contribute to a better understanding of the role of communication in the care management of autism, which has implications for effective autism care.

Keywords : alternative medicine, autism care management, autism spectrum disorder, conventional medicine, parent-provider communication

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