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News

Alternative Argument: Middletown surgeon says nontraditional autism therapies work (With Video)

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Dr. Patrick Elliott will never forget the day one of his 6-year-old twin sons delivered a self-diagnosis to him.

"I don't have autism anymore," the boy announced to his father.

It was a far cry from three years earlier when both twins were diagnosed with the neurobiological affliction of unknown origin. Between the ages of 18 months and 24 months, they went from being playful and happy to ceasing eye contact with others. They had lost any language they had acquired.



"They were basically disengaged," said Elliott, a 47-year-old general and trauma surgeon at Crozer-Chester Medical Center in Upland.

Through a combination of conventional and alternative therapies, one of his twins improved so much he was able to join his peers in the mainstream by the time he entered first grade at his local public school where he is now a fourth grader. He no longer requires therapy. At his parents' request, his name is being withheld from this story.

His twin brother, Bradley, is in fourth grade at a private special education school in Chester County, where he reads and

writes at his grade level. He still receives biomedical intervention.

"He still has issues with anxiety and (obsessive-compulsive disorder)," Elliott said, "but he has dramatically improved and we hope he'll be mainstreamed some day,"

Born in April 2001, the twins initially developed normally as their two older brothers had at their home in Middletown. Their mother, Marie, was the first to notice changes in the twins, Elliott said.

The twin who no longer requires therapy "had horrible, aggressive behaviors, self-injurious behavior, head-banging and echolalia where he would repeat what everybody said," Elliott said. "That's better than no language, but it was clearly a problem."

He noted Bradley would run around the house with his arms extended, totally disengaged, not speaking.

"We thought he had a hearing loss," said Elliott.

Their parents suspected the twins had autism spectrum developmental disorders, which can run the gamut of children who are totally withdrawn to scholars. Symptoms can be mild to disabling and usually involve problems with social interaction, communication, repetitive behavior and obsessive interests.

"We spent six months seeing the kids not getting better, not getting answers and waiting for a developmental pediatrician to see the boys," said Elliott.

The twins were officially diagnosed with autism in late summer 2004, but their parents were able to procure early intervention occupational and speech therapy for them through the Delaware County Intermediate Unit by February 2004.

"It took a little time, but we realized they needed intense behavioral therapy," said Elliott.

Thus began a journey for the Elliotts that took them through a combination of standard and still unproven alternative therapies in their mission to reconnect their twins with the world.

No Holds Barred

Since applied behavioral analysis, an intense form of behavioral therapy, was not covered by health insurance at the time, the Elliotts took out a home equity loan to put together their own therapy program for their autistic sons. In October 2006, they converted their basement into a therapy area and hired a staff of 12, including two behavioral therapy coordinators and 10 college students studying speech or occupational therapy.

"We went from three hours of therapy a week each with very little progress to 25 to 35 hours a week of behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and floortime therapy," said Elliott.

Each boy received six to eight hours a day of therapy, five to six days a week. It was a combination of adult-directed behavioral therapy with child-driven "floortime therapy" which the Elliotts learned from Maude LaRoux of A Total Approach in Concord.

"The kids were engaged almost all the time," said Elliott.

His said his children made progress after two years of the integrative therapy approach.

"Six years ago, intensive behavioral therapy was not considered standard therapy" Elliott said, "and now it is covered by insurance by law as of July 2010."

He noted that Pennsylvania law requires insurance to cover 25 hours a week of intensive behavioral therapy for autistic children.

"What we did was a little innovative at the time," said Elliott.

While ramping up the behavioral therapy, the Elliotts were also beginning to implement what has come to be known as Defeat Autism Now Protocol, a type of biomedical intervention not yet recognized by the mainstream medical community as a proven treatment for autism.

Cause Still Uncertain

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an average of 1 in 110 children in the United States has an autism spectrum disorder, with boys four to five times more likely to be affected than girls. If one identical twin has autism, the chances of the other having it are 60 to 96 percent, according to studies cited by the CDC that noted fraternal twins such as the Elliotts, at most, have a 24 percent chance of both having autism.

Officials at the CDC maintain there is no cure for autism and that the earlier children begin behavioral therapies to help them walk, talk and interact with others, the greater their chance of improved development.

They believe there are many likely causes for autism involving environmental, biologic and genetic factors.

Natural Resources Defense Council Senior Attorney Robert Kennedy Jr. maintains the mercury-containing vaccine preservative thimerosal is responsible for the epidemic of autism in the United States.

While officials from the U.S. Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Family Physicians have said there is no evidence of harm resulting from low levels of thimerosal used in vaccines, in 1999 they recommended it be removed from vaccines routinely prescribed for infants as a precautionary measure.

Elliott noted that while thimerosal has been removed from vaccines, he believes they still contain a lot of metals, including aluminum. Although his twins began manifesting autism symptoms after their immunizations began, he does not place blame on any one vaccination.

"I believe that a combination of environmental factors, in addition to over-vaccination, contributed to an immune problem that resulted in a toxic brain injury that manifests in autism spectrum disorder," said the doctor.

Elliott noted the incidence of autism has grown from 1 in 10,000 live births in 1980 to 1 in 110. He believes people have spent too much time trying to place blame for the surge of autism cases and not enough time investigating whether giving 40 vaccinations to a child under 5, or 30 vaccinations to a child under age 3, is safe.

"There's never been a study that looks at the total vaccination schedule," he maintained, "in terms of the volume of vaccinations given to children with immature immune systems and developing neurologic systems to determine, in fact, if it's safe."

A physician since 1988, Elliott took his beliefs about toxic brain injury into account when researching biomedical intervention as an alternative therapy for his twins.

Healing the Brain

The Defeat Autism Now Protocol includes hyperbaric oxygen chamber therapy sessions or “dives,” intravenous infusions of glutathione, vitamin B shots and other vitamins and a hypoallergenic gluten and casein-free diet.

“I was initially very skeptical of alternative intervention and not everything I tried helped my kids,” Elliott said, “but as my kids improved dramatically, I came to realize autism spectrum disorder is treatable. It has a biomedical component that is treatable.”

He said a hypoallergenic diet free of the proteins gluten and casein is utilized to help heal the injured bowel, known as “a leaky gut,” which is common in autistic children and makes it difficult for them to digest food and purge toxins from their systems.

The intravenous infusion of glutathione, a combination of three amino acids that is considered the body’s master antioxidant, is also intended to detoxify the body and boost the immune system.

The B vitamins are aimed at improving neurological function, cognition and language, said the doctor.

Hyperbaric oxygen chamber therapy, used for wound care and for treating decompression sickness in divers, is not recognized by the mainstream medical community or the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a proven therapy for autistic children.

“The use of hyperbaric oxygen therapy in the treatment of autistic disorders and traumatic brain injury is ‘off label.’ It is not an accepted indication because there’s not enough data to support its use,” Elliott said. “It is not covered by insurance.”

However, he believes 100 percent oxygen under pressure helps decrease inflammation, improve blood flow and promote healing of injured brain tissue.

“Most recently, hyperbaric oxygen is being studied by the U.S. government and the Veterans Administration for treatment of traumatic brain injury and post-concussive syndrome,” said Elliott, who is a board-certified trauma surgeon.

He introduced biomedical intervention and hyperbaric oxygen therapy to his children at home, along with the intense behavioral therapy.

“None of these alternative interventions are cure-alls for autism. There is no magic bullet, but I have found that many of these interventions help many children, including my own,” Elliott said. “My children improved significantly, more than they would with just behavioral and speech therapy.”

Autism Treatment Center

While he had a portable or “soft” hyperbaric therapy chamber at home that could administer 21 to 30 percent oxygen to his children, Elliott felt Bradley could progress better with 100 percent oxygen administered through a “hard” chamber.

He took Bradley to a hyperbaric oxygen therapy center in Newtown Square where he had 188 “dives” between 2007 and 2008. The center closed around June 2009 and reopened last March as Hyperbaric Therapy USA. Lou Granda is president of the Staten Island, N.Y.-based company.

“Bradley continues to get biomedical intervention, including hyperbaric oxygen therapy, nutritional support and, recently, neurotherapy,” said Elliott.

Hyperbaric Therapy USA is a corporate sponsor of Talk About Curing Autism, a nonprofit organization that provides information, resources and support to families affected by autism. The Autism Treatment Center of Newtown Square, dedicated on Nov. 16, is now on the second floor of Hyperbaric Therapy USA and shares the same administrative staff.

Motivated by the improvement he has seen with his twin sons, Elliott said he volunteered to be medical director for the Autism Treatment Center, which is a profit-making venture for Hyperbaric Therapy USA.

"We don't diagnose, we give people a plan and help them access standard therapies and offer alternative therapies that help many children," Elliott said. "We make no guarantees."

The Autism Treatment Center staff includes three hyperbaric technicians, a clinical coordinator, Elliott and another physician, a behavioral therapy consultant, a neurofeedback technician and an occupational therapist who does interactive metronome therapy.

"We don't prey on the desperation of parents of autistic children looking for a cure," Elliott said. "None of this is curative, but the combination of these therapies help many children."

Although he acknowledge the center is meant to turn a profit, Elliott does not charge clients for initial consultations.

"The reason I don't charge is that my children got better and I had the resources to do it," said Elliott.

The doctor does encourage clients to try hyperbaric oxygen chamber therapy, which costs \$130 a dive. He usually recommends 40 dives over eight weeks. He also encourages clients to try the hypoallergenic diet for which there are laboratory costs. In addition, there are charges for vitamins, as well as for interactive metronome therapy and neurofeedback.

"It's kind of like a co-op," Elliott said. "We make sure our prices are reasonable."

He noted that the Autism Treatment Center of Newtown Square has about 30 clients in a hyperbaric oxygen therapy regimen and about 30 more in biomedical intervention programs. They range in age from 18 months to 27 years old.

"We're not an educational center, we're an alternative treatment center," said Elliott. "We're offering a 'one-stop shop' where parents can come and get a comprehensive treatment plan for their children."

Elliott said the Autism Treatment Center has attracted visitors from some of the intermediate units in the area, although the Delaware County Intermediate Unit was not among them as of mid-November.

Tried and True

The Delaware County Intermediate Unit, one of 29 regional educational agencies established by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1970, is educating 245 autistic clients ranging in age from 3 to 21, said Melanie Sharps, assistant director of special programs.

"That number will continue to rise as school districts send more students to us and as early intervention continues to identify students," said Sharps.

She noted autism diagnoses are increasing due to earlier identification by pediatricians, improved diagnostic techniques, the opening of hospital diagnostic centers, increased parental awareness and increased autism research, among other factors.

At a public cost of about \$44,000 per student, plus related services, Delaware County Intermediate Unit officials administer their autism program at the Marple Education Center, which includes prekindergarten through 12th grade and an early intervention program.

None of the teaching techniques employed there are considered alternative.

"We use best practices and have two programs in particular that reflect best practices in teaching students with autism — the Verbal Behavior Model and the Competent Learner Model," said Sharps.

She noted there is no one program that works for all students.

"That's why teachers have a multitude of strategies to use with each student," Sharps said, "to see what works best for that student."

She is familiar with hyperbaric oxygen therapy, biomedical intervention and other alternative treatments for autism.

"Parents have tried many of these and some say that they see an improvement in their child," Sharps said, "and some say they don't."

She feels it is up to parents to decide whether to try alternative treatments for their autistic children.

For Elliott, he has no doubt a combination of alternative and proven therapies has plugged his twins back into the world.

"I often say I got into alternative medicine because mainstream medicine gave me no alternative to help my children," the surgeon said.

He still remembers the panic and desperation he felt when his twins were diagnosed with autism six years ago.

"They gave us a diagnosis, a social worker and little hope for improvement or recovery for our children," said Elliott.

His son who is now mainstreamed and no longer requires therapy has already informed Elliott he intends to be a lawyer. Although Bradley still is undergoing therapy for autism, he plays football with his brothers, swims in the ocean and cracks jokes. Elliott fully expects Bradley will one day be mainstreamed in school just like his twin brother.

"We have our sons back," the doctor said.

The Autism Treatment Center is on the second floor of the Hyperbaric Therapy USA building at 3744 West Chester Pike in Newtown Square. For more information call 610-355-1748 or access www.hbtusa.com.

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