There have been several recent newspaper articles about the new DSM-IV criteria for autism spectrum disorders that have created concern for many. Some statements have been made suggesting that large numbers of people will no longer meet the criteria, lose their diagnosis and no longer be eligible for services. Until the DSM-V is finalized and published, presumably in 2013, no one is sure of the exact wording of the new criteria. However, a draft set of criteria has been created by the working group and has been available for public comment for several months.

The proposed criteria make several significant changes. Rather than having separate criteria for qualitative social differences and qualitative language differences these two categories are combined into one social/communication category. This makes sense because communication is fundamentally a social behavior. Some people with autism also may have problems with speech and the proposed criteria do not rule this out.

Secondly the new criteria reduce the number of criteria from 12 to seven. Rather than needing to have six of the twelve a person would need to meet all three criteria in the social/communication area and two of four in the area of restricted and repetitive behavior. Sensory differences have been added as a criterion.

Finally, Asperger Syndrome would no longer be a separate diagnosis. Any one who meets the six criteria would be diagnosed with autism. A severity qualifier (currently the proposal is level 1, level 2 or level 3) based on how much support the person needs to function would be added. There has been much debate and research since 1995 in an attempt to determine if and how Asperger Syndrome is fundamentally different from autism. The research suggests that there is no fundamental difference between the two other than the early development of speech.

Until the criteria have been in use for several years it will not be clear whether they will work better or worse than the current ones. It is my opinion that the new criteria would make at most a small difference in how I have diagnosed autism spectrum disorder over the past 10 years. I cannot think of anyone I know who has a diagnosis under the old system that would not also meet these new criteria.

There is a concern about how to classify those individuals who have the characteristics described in either DSM-IV or DSM V who do not need any support to function well. Technically they would not be diagnosed under either system and yet many people with high functioning forms of autism feel that the diagnosis is helpful to them. This is a philosophical question since the DSM is used to label conditions that need intervention rather than to identify differences as such.

In summary, it is my opinion, as a practicing psychologist diagnosing autism spectrum disorder, that there is no need for anyone to panic about the proposed DSM V criteria.

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