LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Role of the Speech Therapist in Management of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the COVID-19 pandemic era

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a challenging period for most families of individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that encompasses changes in social communication, social interaction, and behavioural patterns (APA, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictive measures that have been implemented to contain the spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) may affect the routine of people with ASD and consequently cause adverse outcomes including anxiety, stress, anger attacks, regression in behaviour development, hyperactivity and difficulty in adapting to new routines in the home environment (Eshraghi et al, 2020; Smile, 2020). The current scenario has also modified the provision of services to this population and their families (Smile, 2020). These changes include absence of multidisciplinary therapies, and decreased time in classrooms due to school closures (Narzisi, 2020; Smile, 2020).

With reduced health and education supports, there may be an increase in the frequency and severity of behaviours in individuals with ASD (Colizzi et al, 2020). A recent study showed that 94% of families reported a significant increase in home care, of whom 41% described more frequent and intense behaviour (Colizzi et al, 2020). In one sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered opportunities for reflection on autism and how to address and treat these individuals' mental health conditions during long periods of routine interruption.

At the time of writing this manuscript, SARS-CoV-2 had infected more than 3 million people and resulted in more than 100,000 deaths in Brazil, making the country the newest epicentre of the disease. In this context, telemedicine has played an important role in providing remote services to people during the COVID-19 pandemic (BRASIL, 2020a). The use of remote technologies provides fast communication without displacements and agglomerations, and ensures that health care is continuously provided, reducing the risks of SARS-CoV-2 spread (Lurie and Carr, 2018; Caetano et al, 2020).

For people with ASD, remote care can be an effective way to improve the accessibility of consultations by a multi-professional team. It has been shown that the telemedicine approach increases the sense of competence, improves social communication skills, and there is an adherence to the intervention by the parents (Narzisi, 2020). This approach requires intense one-on-one supervision by highly trained professionals (Baharav and Reiser, 2010). However, telemedicine can be restricted to a smaller number of individuals with autism, especially among families with better socioeconomic conditions and people with a less severe form of ASD. Speech therapists play a major role in the management of this complex condition because of the high demand for treating language problems and speech disorders among people with ASD. In the current scenario, speech therapists can work remotely by monitoring the treatments already planned, and ensuring technical training for family members to improve language and communication skills of people with ASD (Patterson et al, 2012).

The speech therapy should be based mainly on communicative strategies, either by gestures, signs, or electronic devices (Mandak and Light, 2018). The goal is to help the person with ASD to communicate in a more useful and functional way. The use of technology for speech therapy in autism can be effective in developing verbal, non-verbal and social communication skills, but the strategies implemented need to be individual, including accurate and confident information for family members (Defense-Netrval and Fernandes, 2016). In addition, there is evidence that continued therapy using an online platform does not appear to harm the results achieved from traditional therapy.

Communication using expressions and gestures favours the professional-client relationship and is essential for adherence to treatment. However, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) seems to be an additional challenge for speech therapists because of the difficulty in communicating through facial expressions and gestures. In addition, the use of facemasks reduces the acoustic transmission and impairs lip reading (CNN, 2020).

Another challenge is related to the difficulty of using masks or face covering for people with ASD. Although these are important measures in reducing the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission (CDC, 2020), people with ASD may not adapt to them. For this reason, a recent Federal law dispenses with the obligatory use of facemasks for people with disabilities, intellectual or sensory impairment, including people with ASD (BRASIL, 2020b).

Speech therapists must be prepared for the proper management of people with ASD, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, in the post-pandemic period, changes and innovations must persist, in addition to face-to-face care options for autistic clients who have failed to adapt to remote care. Clients must be selected according to an order of priority, indication and established criteria. All procedures must be performed safely and with the use of appropriate PPE. On the other hand, distance treatment measures should be encouraged until the population is vaccinated. Finally, speech therapists must ensure the necessary support for individuals with autism and their families, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, through adaptations in their clinical approach, such as the remote monitoring of routine care. Studies on the consequences on behaviour and communication resulting from COVID-19 are needed among people with ASD.

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