

New edge to fight against autism

By Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, Oct. 10. Over two million autistic children are estimated to be living with varying degrees of autism in India, with only a fraction of them being diagnosed and receiving badly needed help. However, for those diagnosed, family support, parent and professional group therapy and teaching have already brought the light at the end of the tunnel closer.

This was amply demonstrated at a national workshop on autism organised by Action for Autism (AFA) for parents and professionals, which concluded here today. Parents of newly identified autistic children and professionals from across the country attended the workshop.

Dustin Hoffman's Oscar-winning role in "Rainman" may be the most famous and ill-used autistic person today. Yet nearly half-a-century after autism (a developmental disability impairing social skills and communication and imaginative abilities of children and adults) was first described as a syndrome by Leo Kanner, and despite the fact that 15 in every 10,000 children are autistic, it remains little understood the world over. "This makes day-to-day life a compli-

cated challenge for autistic children," Ms. Merry Barua of AFA, said, adding that people still tended to regard autism as a form of mental retardation.

Autism affects children from families of all backgrounds, and 80 per cent of those affected are boys. It is now recognised that children with autism need different educational techniques. Yet, there are approximately three schools catering to people with autism today, maintains AFA.

While several approaches to the problem of autism have been used with good results, AFA has peddled the line that parents do have the answer to their problems. "Knowing their children best, parents can prove to be the best advocates for their children. At these workshops, we tell parents that they have the right to access anything that their child needs." This empowers the children, and parent groups increase mutual interaction and problem and information sharing.

The workshop, being held annually for several years, addressed issues like parental acceptance of their child's condition, and learning to see the child first and autism later. The children need to be taught communication skills differ-

ently depending on whether they are verbal or non-verbal. Parents have also to learn to manage behaviour problems in public and at home, and prepare their children for classroom teaching.

The workshop for professionals, meant for those who need to have an understanding of how to work with autistic children, particularly dealt with children who are accommodated in mixed-disability schoolrooms. Ms. Sandra Dawson, also from AFA, said the workshop emphasised self-help for the families of children with autism, and while it addressed "new parents", there were several children and parents who had come through the difficult time and retrieved the autistic children from them solitary world.

Asked about the need for integrated schools, Ms. Barua said, "In an ideal situation, there is nothing like a family initiative and an integrated school to turn the situation round for a child with autism." However, the concept was yet to become widely accepted, or practised more effectively in institutions which had declared themselves integrated, and at this nebulous stage, it would mean more harm for the child to be in such an atmosphere, she felt.