

1.7m autistic people in India

'Yet government doesn't recognise it as disability'

New Delhi, Oct. 8: Autism, a "spectrum disorder" of the brain ranging from a mild learning and social disability to severe impairment, affects an estimated 1.7 million people in India. The disorder is not rare but a majority of autistic people in the country have not been diagnosed and do not receive the services they need, a workshop on autism highlighted here on Thursday.

In India especially there is tremendous lack of awareness and misunderstanding about autism among the medical professionals who may either mis-diagnose or under-diagnose the condition, observed Ms Merry Barua, director of Action for Autism a voluntary society which is organising the workshop.

Ms Barua claimed that despite the number of people affected by autism in India, the government does not currently recognise it as a disability. Without

recognition schools catering solely to autistic persons could not receive funding from the government.

She pointed out that persons with autism are also not eligible for concessions and benefits offered by the government unless they are diagnosed as mentally retarded. Autism can be due to a multiplicity of causes which can occur alongside conditions such as mental retardation and hyperactivity. But many people with autism are not mentally retarded, she said.

Ms Barua founded the AFA in 1991 after her son was diagnosed as being autistic and she could not find any organisation working in this area who could help her to understand the disorder.

The AFA serves families with autistic children throughout India, offering assessment, counselling, information distribution and referral home-based management programmes. Ms Barua observed that

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