BRIEF REPORT

Seeing the doctor without fear: www.doctortea.org for the desensitization for medical visits in Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Phobia; Systematic desensitisation; Disability; Autism; Anxiety

Abstract

Introduction: Doctor Tea is an online website designed to facilitate medical visits for those with autism spectrum disorder and other disabilities. People diagnosed with autism not only have greater medical needs than the general population, but also have particular characteristics that are often not accommodated by medical services. This lack of medical accommodation often creates a very complicated, and sometimes traumatic experience, when visiting medical facilities. Individuals with autism have great difficulty understanding social situations and contexts, such as medical tests or consultations, as well as difficulty in tolerating new situations and atypical sensory thresholds. Doctor Tea aims to reduce anxiety before medical consultations and procedures from a safe and well-known environment (school, home, etc.).

Material and method: The website, www.doctortea.org, provides information and materials (videos, cartoon, 3D animations, pictogram sequences, etc.) about the most frequent medical procedures and practices for patients with autism. The website also offers information to the doctors and families of patients with autism about the most common medical problems associated with autism.

Results: A total of 17,199 different users visited the website during 2015, with a total of 23,348 online visitors from more than 70 different countries since the website’s release in November 2014.

Conclusions: The familiarisation with the medical procedures and its environment appears to decrease the anxiety in patients with disabilities during medical visits, as well as optimising the effectiveness of their medical visits and tests.

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**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Fobia; Desensibilización sistemática; Discapacidad; Autismo; Ansiedad

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**Ir al médico sin miedo: www.doctortea.org para la habituación al entorno médico de pacientes con autismo**

**Resumen**

**Introducción:** Doctor Tea es una página web diseñada para facilitar las visitas médicas de las personas con trastornos del espectro del autismo y/o con otras discapacidades. Las personas con autismo en muchas ocasiones no solo tienen mayores necesidades médicas que la población general, sino que presentan, además, unas características particulares que hacen que acceder a los servicios médicos se convierta en una experiencia muy complicada e incluso a veces traumática. Estas personas tienen grandes dificultades para comprender situaciones y contextos con implicación social como una prueba o consulta médica; dificultad para tolerar situaciones nuevas; y umbrales sensoriales atípicos. Doctor Tea tiene como objetivo reducir la ansiedad ante consultas, procedimientos y profesionales médicos desde un ambiente seguro y conocido (colegio, casa, etc.).

**Material y método:** La página www.doctortea.org proporciona información y materiales (videos, dibujos animados, animaciones 3D, secuencias de pictogramas, etc.) sobre las prácticas médicas más frecuentes a las que los pacientes con trastornos del espectro del autismo se tienen que enfrentar. También ofrece información a los médicos sobre las características de estos pacientes y a las familias sobre los problemas médicos más frecuentemente asociados.

**Resultados:** Durante el año 2015, 17.199 usuarios diferentes visitaron la web. Desde su lanzamiento en noviembre de 2014 el número de visitantes fue de 23.348 personas procedentes de más de 70 países diferentes.

**Conclusiones:** La familiarización con el entorno y los procedimientos médicos parece disminuir la ansiedad frente a los mismos y permite optimizar la eficacia de las visitas médicas y las pruebas complementarias que las personas con discapacidad necesitan.

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**Introduction**

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) not only have greater medical needs than the rest of the population, they also present some specific characteristics that make it possible that access to medical services could become a traumatic experience. Individuals with ASD: (1) have significant difficulties in understanding and anticipating social situations and contexts such as those that occur in a medical test or visit to the doctor, where the doctor–patient interaction is essential for correct diagnosis and treatment of any disease; (2) can present a marked difficulty in recognising and expressing symptoms and, at times, their parents report that their pain threshold is above that of the general population, which means that their illnesses run the risk of getting worse before being detected; and (3) generally show a significant lack of flexibility and great rigidity when faced with adapting to new places and people, especially in situations that involve a certain amount of uncertainty and whose probability of unexpected changes is high (for example, in a hospital).

Children with ASD present a higher number of medical phobias when compared with children of their same mental age. They also present significantly greater levels of anxiety in relation to medical procedures than the general population.

To respond to these difficulties, a pioneering experience began in 2009 in the Community of Madrid: the creation of a comprehensive medical programme for medical services for patients with ASD, set up in the Hospital General Universitario Gregorio Marañón. The main goal of this programme was to provide coordinated and specialised medical attention to the population with ASD in this community to cover their basic healthcare needs.

From its opening in April 2009 through January 2016, 1910 patients were included in the AMI-ASD programme (with 79% being younger than 18 years old), a total of 17,845 consultations in Psychiatry and 8173 consultations in other specialties were handled, and a total of 3213 medical tests were performed. In the course of the activity of the AMI-ASD programme, the following factors became evident: (1) the advantage of having training before the visit and the medical tests, training centred on familiarisation with the clinical surroundings, and (2) the lack of easily available specific material for working on this prior desensitisation.

In our setting, there are some medical familiarisation experiences, above all in the educational environment. These attempt, through structured programmes based on desensitisation, to get their students used to the specifics of the healthcare setting (white coats, waiting times, diagnostic procedures, etc.). The programmes use “in vivo” elements, such as therapists disguised as doctors, and real medical devices. However, certain medical procedures and tests (such as a magnetic resonance scan, an orthopantomography or an electroencephalogram) are difficult to simulate, bearing in mind the lack of accessibility to these devices from an educational viewpoint.
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