

# Perspectives

By **Matthew Belmonte**

Member of the Cure Autism Now Scientific Review Council

**W**hen I was asked to join the Cure Autism Now Scientific Review Council (SRC) I didn't know what to expect. I'm much more comfortable in a laboratory interacting with things than in a committee meeting interacting with people. And I was a bit nervous as to what sort of contribution I might make. I was told that Cure Autism Now was seeking out people with a dual expertise: our scientific backgrounds would help us make sense of autism research proposals and results and the first-hand experience of autism in our families would allow us to gauge the significance of these proposals for alleviating the suffering caused by autism.

I certainly satisfied both of these criteria. I was using magnetic resonance scanning to image the neurophysiology of attention in autism, and this work held a special fascination for me since I had grown up in the shadow of an autistic older brother and was at the time coming to terms with my niece's diagnosis of autism.

It's ironic- or perhaps inevitable – that my scientific work has ended up focusing on autism, since what got me into science in the first place was my similarity to my older brother. Neither of us could tolerate being out of control of our surroundings. I remember rocking back and forth for ages, listening to sound interference patterns change with the position of my head, staring endlessly at parallax and visual flow. Patterned, predictable stimulation offered me a cozy relief from anxiety. Much later on, when I was in graduate school and made my first independent

discovery about the neurophysiology of autism, that same sense of relief flooded through me. Scientific research may seem a far cry from rocking and hand-flapping but it has the same fundamental goal, that of making the world a bit more predictable.

I have no doubt that this is why so many high-functioning people with autism, and so many of their relatives, are scientists and engineers. They are more sensitive to order and chaos in the universe. I like to describe them as “human, but more so.”

I sometimes think of the attack on autism as a sort of pincer movement, with genetics and biochemistry coming in from one side and psychology, anatomy and physiology from the other. The pincers will meet when functional and developmental models of autistic cognition are explained on a molecular level, and I believe that this will happen within my lifetime. Cure Autism Now is on the front line of autism research, funding bold projects each of which may or may not open new avenues. The members of the SRC bring a wide range of clinical and basic science expertise to bear on the direction of this front. We also understand something about the way people with autism think, and this experience gives us a special insight. ●

*Perspectives is a forum for researchers, scientists, parents and others involved with Cure Autism Now to present their personal views about how autism has touched their lives and what they are doing to make a difference. To submit an article for consideration e-mail [ekilpatrick@cureautismnow.org](mailto:ekilpatrick@cureautismnow.org).*

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