

Autism Genome Project on way to unravel the mystery

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DOHA: The Autism Genome Project that the Shafallah Centre and Autism Speaks are working on has achieved a breakthrough that will help in autism treatment. Some results of the project will be released in a few weeks, scientists working on it said yesterday.

A consortium of institutes that includes various specialists from all over the world has been working on the Autism Genome Project for the last four years. The programme aims to “unravel the mystery of autism” and help diagnose autism at a very early stage.

“We have been getting results along the way. The first result we had came about two years ago... and we have more results coming out in a couple of weeks... there’s more to expect before the end of the year. So this year is going to be very exciting for the genetics discovery section. We can see more genes that are evolving in cell-to-cell communication, neural functions... we could see there is something fundamentally wrong with the way the brain inspired individual autism,” Andy Shih, vice president of scientific affairs, Autism Speaks, told The Peninsula.

The research, which was done in South Korea, shows autism is not localised anywhere and its prevalence is the same throughout the world. This discovery can help enhance autism treatment worldwide.

Dr. Hatem El Shanti, director of the Shafallah Medical and Genetics Centre, said all the members of the consortium had the same methodology and all the systems had been standardised so that the results could be pooled in.

“That’s very good for us because that will speed up the process of (further research). We have epidemiology studies in Taiwan and India, and there’s been one in Korea, and they’re all in the early stages, the Korean one is completely finished. We’re also about to have one in Mexico,” said Bob Wright, co-founder of Autism Speaks.

“Every member of the consortium has done a wonderful job... The beauty of this collaboration is in getting countries involved... Qatar is one of the countries who recently joined, but the outcome of this project will be helpful worldwide.”

“We now have a sense of direction on what mechanism causes autism in some cases... before this we had no idea because... it’s not like cancer that we have the cells that grow uncontrollably or Alzheimer, where we know that there’s a mechanism that acts on the brain. In autism, previously we had no idea, but with the help of research like with Dr El Shanti and others from around the world, we are starting to unravel the mystery of autism,” said Shih.

The Shafallah Center became an Autism Speaks Global Affiliate for the Middle East region last year. Shafallah’s autism awareness campaign has been lauded as one of the best with the use of the largest ever billboards for disability awareness in the region and an on board autism awareness documentary in Qatar Airways.