WHO WILL CARE FOR ASHWYN?

Ashwyn Grdap Kealinal, 13, grows his father, Kevin Grdap, 37, at Changi Airport’s Terminal 3, as he waits for another flight to take place. Ashwyn has autism. He was diagnosed with severe autism and attends a day activity center, the SA1 Autism Centre housed within the Sonya’s Home in Singapore. The centre, which serves seven children, has a daily schedule that includes physiotherapy and reading sessions, and urges a variety of after-school activities including visits to McDonald’s and the assemblying of food boxes for an airline company. Ashwyn watches a Police Academy movie on DVD after he returns home from the day activity center. He keeps his finger on the fast-forward button and is done with the film in 20 minutes. His dad is a fan of the Police Academy series and has tried to pitch the idea of filming actors. Ashwyn also is a big fan of the “Matrix” movie series, and 6-year-old Eliza, his brother, has performed in a hit film impersonation for a school fundraiser.

When his sister, Arina (centre right), who works in publishing, visited London, Ashwyn visited the city for a week. After a few months later, she told him he was studying in London. “I will hold my hands and I will chase my nose in public and I don’t really care what people think,” she says. “It’s even funnier when I hold them beside the two boys.”

One Saturday evening, Ashwyn tried to convince her to take him to those two boys in the Toys “R” Us at Westfield Mall (bottom right). She eventually coaxes him into adding only nine for the already burgeoning collection.

Ashwyn has looked at the different services that are available for autistic individuals in London. She says there are no concrete plans for the future, but she would “never want to institutionalise him.”

The pictures below are taken by one of the first Singaporean parents of autistic children who has an autistic child. The pictures were taken in 2006. Arina, 28, attended MDS’ forum, and Ashwyn’s temperament improved after finding out about the various medicines that were making him violent.

TIPS AND TALKS

There are currently 10 governmen- t-sponsored schools here catering to peo- ple with autism and all of them have cut-off ages ranging from 10 to 15. Beyond that age, parents rely on the support of the three main voluntary groups who address the condition here — the Autism Association Singapore, the Autism Resource Centre (AARC) and the Singapore Autism Society (SACS). Only two centres — the St Andrew’s Day Activity Centre (OABC), which is part of the SACS, and the AARC’s Autism Centre (SACS), which is part of Sunflower Home for the intellectually disabled — offer any sort of adult programme.

And their combined capacity is about 30, with both now at full capacity.

The two centres have lengthy waiting lists, which is not surprising given that Ashwyn, a volunteer worker organisation that runs Pathsersistent for child- ren with autism, estimates that there are more than 24,000 individuals with autism here — of whom about 10,000 are aged 18 and above.

According to Ms Denise Phua, presi- dent of ABC, the statistics based on an estimate that one in 12 Singaporeans has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The number is sufficient enough to re- ceive specialised help it is not limited to the overall total of individuals with the condition here.

Fewer than 0.2 per cent of adults with autism, or only in 700, get specialised help at DMC and SAC, according to fig- ures.

About 950 students are enrolled in spe- cial schools for the disabled and are diag- nosed with ASD, according to the Nation- al Council of Social Services. And about 100 adults with autism also receive care at day care centres, in addition to clients with autism at centres for the intellec- tually disabled in Singapore.

The beneficial impact of each such centre on adults with autism is in doubt.

The Christian Outreach is the Handi- cAPPED (CHO), which runs two-day activi- ty centres for people with intellectual dis- abilities at Too Payoh and Tampines, has 20 clients aged 15 to 27, and 24 of them have autism.

Ms Rosalind Ho, 56, a CHI pro- gramme staff member with six years of ex- perience in special needs care, has seen the benefits of mixing individuals with au- tism with those suffering from other dis- orders. She points out, for example, that the centre’s integrated programme helps those with autism accept changes in their routine — something more of them have a problem with — because they can see other- clients coping.

Residential options are available for adults in some mixed-care centres, but spaces, for example, are provided for those with autism on a case-by-case ba- sis at residential homes such as the Ro- bineau House for the Intellectually Disab- led in Singapore. In addition, adult autism association uses the support of workers at jobs, initiatives such as the Open Door Fund, which is administered by the Na- tional Employers’ Federation, give companies incentive to employ staff with disabilities including autism.

Without sufficient training and support, however, holding on to jobs is often diffi- cult for those with autism, says Ms Phua. For this reason, her husband, Mr Jacky Tang, 55, the former senior vice-presi- dent of Singapore Technologies Telecom- munications, set up his own set up with the intention of making it an example of a "re- ported employment model.”

Ms Phua sat on a computer with a keyboard and mouse, enabling her to type on her computer.

The Professor Brown Cafe at Nove- square has four workers with autism aged 25 to 34. “It’s of received part in a visi- tational training and further on the-job training, under full-time Social workers, and even some who have a job or the desire for a job, which is something unique,” she says.

Early intervention is crucial to improv- ing autistic behaviour, experts say. Younger children are easier to teach be- cause they learn and interact whatever it is that’s taught. Given early help, many with mild autism may eventually be un-