

By Timothy Kitundu, Dar es Salaam

A centre, Dar es Salaam-based World Federation Autistic Day Care Centre, dedicated to the exclusive task of taking care for children with autism, is in need of support as the demand for its services exceeds the centre's capacity now.

This was revealed this week when a memorable event was organized there in the three-year-old centre. The day was colourful, resplendent with a fancy dress show where children with their particular medical condition were the main players.

According to experts, autism is a lifelong developmental disability that arises in early childhood and results in delays in development of abilities such as language, and play with others, communication and social relationships.

The condition often progresses into adulthood and independent living is uncommon. About 50 per cent of autistic people have learning disabilities, but some are very intelligent and gifted in specific areas. An example of this is seen in that good film *The Rain Man* ( Dustin Hoffman), where the autistic man in question could do fantastic mathematical operations in his head.

The cause of autism, according to experts, is still unknown; research is beginning to provide some indications. It is not clear whether there is a single cause or a group of causes of autism. The following are key aspects of evidence-based thinking about possible causes of autism.

Current research centres on the possibility of a variety of conditions affecting brain development at the time of birth. On the other hand, evidence suggests that autism is a genetic condition. Research is complicated by the possibility that it is not a single condition but a range of developmental disorders of the brain.

Diamond Trust Bank Tanzania Limited, through its Corporate Social Responsibility initiative that aims at reinforcing community service participation of its staff members, provided full financial sponsorship of Saturday's event to enable the objectives of WFAACC for the benefit of these children.

Linda Chiza, Assistant Manager, Corporate Communication and Marketing DTBT, underscored that considering the disability is one that faces a lot of Tanzanians today, media coverage of this occasion was essential.

"Not only to provide moral for these children but also focus in giving exposure to the reality of this condition and provide the necessary information to parents who have children living with this condition, not forgetting expectant parents. This is a nightmare to any parent, and a situation that needs support from the community,"

she said.

Consultant physician Zulfiquari Abbas, WFAACC's managing trustee, appropriately emphasizes the need for society to chip in and help mitigate the devastation that autism can cause for children and the larger society. He hailed all those who have been extending their assistance to the centre.

Quoting a statement made by the caretaker of an autistic child, he said, "Because an autistic child looks normal, others assume they are naughty or the parents are not controlling the child. Stronger frequently comment on this as failure on the part of parents".

According to Dr. Abbas, a person with autism says: "Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything".

Treatment and various therapies are available in developed countries; however, no facilities for such children exist in most of the developing world. The condition is present in all communities in Dar es Salaam and outside Dar es Salaam.

Specialist education and structured support can really make life easier for a person with autism by helping them to maximize skills and achieve the full potential of life goals in adulthood.

According to Dr. Abbas, it was felt that by establishing this centre in Dar es Salaam, an urgently needed service for improving the physical and mental health of these neglected children and their families will be met.

The school is staffed and managed by experienced professionals. Their aim is to provide a stable, structured, good environment for the children. Future plans for the centre include enlarging the facilities to provide services for 60 students.

The vision, mission and values of the autistic centre are a world where autism is understood, and people with autism are recognized and supported and receive the same rights and opportunities as others, and to ensure that people with autism, their families, and their careers receive the services and

representation they need. People with autism generally experience three main areas of difficulty:

- They have difficulty in relating socially, to other people, hence may not pay attention, seem aloof and withdrawn and may behave in ways not suitable for the circumstances.

- They may never develop meaningful speech, and others can have great difficulty in non-verbal communication. Therefore, they don't fully understand facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice.

- They may have great difficulty in understanding how other people feel, think and react. They also have a limited range of imaginative activities that may be repetitive. Together with this, they resist change and dislike variety.

Virtually children with autism show the symptoms and can be diagnosed between the ages of two to four. A correct diagnosis at this age means treatment and intervention at an early stage, which makes all the difference to the child's future.

The outlook is that autism continues for life, and as the severity can vary it is difficult to predict the outcome for each child. Until a 100 per cent preventive treatment is found, there is only one goal in mind: "How can we help this child be the best person with autism that he/she can be?"



Children suffering from Autism entertain guests who have come to see them perform during their fancy dress show sponsored by DTBT. The event took place at the WFAACC Centre based in Mwanini caring for children with Autism