

National Autism Center Responds to NBC *Today's Show* Segment
"Travolta Admits Son Had Autism"

September 24, 2009

I am writing in response to a discussion Thursday on the Today Show about Jett Travolta's co-morbid diagnosis.

First, let me say we appreciate the coverage about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), which will help to raise public awareness about some of the related challenges individuals on the autism spectrum may face. You also touched on the unfortunate reality for families associated with acknowledging their child's diagnosis in a society that is not always understanding or supportive.

In discussing Jett's dual diagnosis of ASD and seizure disorder, Dr. Snyderman commented that children with autism are "not more likely" to have a seizure disorder than children without autism. The best estimates at this time are, in fact, that at least 25% of individuals on the autism spectrum have a co-morbid seizure disorder.

Families, caregivers, and service providers must work to ensure that children with ASD have the greatest chances of reaching their potential by learning and developing in their environments. In many cases, this requires an understanding of seizure disorders and how they might impact a child's health and response to treatment. For example, many children and adolescents have absence seizures which are not readily apparent to their parents, teachers, and others around them. If they believe that seizures are not likely to be a challenge children with autism will experience, parents and educators alike may misinterpret a child's vacant stare as a form of social disconnectedness. Some individuals with seizure disorders experience seizure-induced aggression. This behavior may be interpreted as being function-based instead of a physiological response to seizures. Developing appropriate treatments in these cases is clearly tied to proper diagnosis.

We felt it was important to clarify this point, particularly given the increased coverage resulting from the tragedy of Jett Travolta's death.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Susan M. Wilczynski, PhD, BCBA
Executive Director, National Autism Center