Today’s piece was prepared by Jeff Beck, MD based on a story from the L.A. Times, entitled: Discovering Autism. Autism boom: an epidemic of disease or of discovery? <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/autism/la-me-autism-day-one-html,0,1218038.htmlstory>

In this 4-part article, reporter Alan Zarembo discusses autism and the way that the diagnosis has changed over the last several decades, specifically in California. He describes how the number of students receiving special services in California for a diagnosis of autism has grown fivefold between 2000 and 2011, and he makes loose reference to the variety of unsubstantiated speculations regarding the source(s) of this increase, including environmental culprits. The impression his analysis leaves with the reader is that a diagnosis of autism is highly subjective and as a result the increased incidence is most likely related to a surge in diagnosis. His article implies that many providers generously give a diagnosis of autism to allow a child to qualify for specific state benefits, interventions, and programs. He supports this claim with data from a survey published in 2009, which found that nearly 40% of children once identified as autistic no longer had the diagnosis. Additionally, he reports that in the state of California, living within 250 meters of a child with the diagnosis of autism, increased the incidence of another diagnosis of autism by 42%, compared to living between 500 and 1,000 meters away, suggesting simple awareness of the spectrum of autism and how a diagnosis can improve access to services increases its rate of diagnosis, and that “warrior” parents (through means of persistence, legal aid and other methods) influence the likelihood of having their child diagnosed and, thereby, receiving desired services. Other influences identified include socioeconomic disparities.

This article raises important questions about how autism is diagnosed. At the same time, it’s important to recognize this article as a journalist’s narrative, rather than as a peer-reviewed scientific exploration. This article is broadly well-considered and incorporates second-hand perspectives of many acclaimed scientists in the field of autism. Accuracy in diagnosing autism is especially relevant with increasingly limited resources in school districts, which bear some of the cost of special programs and interventions. It is important to recognize the downstream effects of expanding the definition of autism.

**AUTISM RESOURCES:**

* **Washington State Dept of Health: Autism** *Important resources for families in Washington state concerned about autism spectrum disorders which includes a link to the Autism guidebook for Washington state* <http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/autism/default.htm>
* **Autism Society of Washington** *includes resources and support groups for families* <http://www.autismsocietyofwa.org>
* **Autism Information Center** through the CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>

And that’s today’s Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics: IN THE NEWS!