Today’s piece was prepared by Sarah Dixon, MD, based on a Time Magazine story entitled “Could Amanda Knox Have an Autism Spectrum Disorder?”

<http://healthland.time.com/2011/06/30/could-amanda-knox-have-an-autism-spectrum-disorder/>

This article discusses the events and behaviors of Amanda Knox, an American 23-year-old University of Washington undergraduate convicted of sexual assault and murder of her roommate while living in Italy in 2007. The article uses secondhand accounts of Knox’s behaviors and personality traits (including those of a friend and of her father) to suggest the possibility of an Asperger’s Disorder diagnosis. The article comments that at the time of questioning, Knox made faces at and kissed her boyfriend, and remained cool and calm without showing apparent sadness. It describes her as a person who was smart yet gullible, dorky, sang loudly and had odd opinions on music. The article also suggests that her perceived preoccupation with justice (staying in Italy to help with investigation) and tendency towards promiscuity can be typical of women with Asperger’s. The author interviewed a psychologist and female author with autism to corroborate that these examples are consistent with an Asperger’s diagnosis.

Speculating about the diagnosis of a Pervasive Developmental Disorder is ubiquitous in the media, communities and among many families we see. The behavioral examples may or may not be a part of a disorder, but speculating about this is dangerous for readers and possibly for Knox herself who is in the appeal process. This kind of reporting can create fear that behaviors that may be just strange or odd are actually pathologic. In addition, a number of these behaviors were witnessed under a time of significant stress- after the death of a roommate and undergoing a police investigation. A psychosocial or neurodevelopmental assessment would never be conducted at such a time as the behaviors may not be consistent with the patient’s baseline and may mimic other disorders that could not be excluded. Perpetuating speculation about Pervasive Developmental Disorders in the popular media with a lack of reliable and complete information is irresponsible and may encourage readers to do so in their own lives.

For parents, friends or families who want to learn more about the autism spectrum disorders or are concerned about a child’s behavior can use these reliable and accurate resources:

The National Institutes of Health’s information on Autism Spectrum Disorders: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism/complete-index.shtml>

First Signs Website: <http://www.firstsigns.org/>

References:

Plauche Johnson C, Myers SM, the Council on Children with Disabilities. “Identification and Evaluation of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders.” Pediatrics; Vol 120 (5), 2007.