Today’s piece was prepared by Lindsay Fox, MD, and is based on an article from the New York Times, entitled “An Outbreak of Autism, or a statistical fluke?”

[www.nytimes.com/2009/03/17/health/17auti.html?pagewanted=2&\_r=1&hp?8dpc](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/17/health/17auti.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&hp?8dpc)

This article is about what seems to be a “surge of autism cases” in the Somali immigrant community in Minneapolis and whether the surge can be considered an “outbreak or a statistical fluke.” There are no legitimate statistics cited, but the Minnesota Department of Health is conducting an epidemiological survey in conjunction with the CDC to gather more information. This apparent increase in autism and disproportionate burden in Somali immigrant children has been noted by Minneapolis school officials, pediatricians and parents, causing fear in the Somali community.

Speculation about explanations ranges from lack of vitamin D, genetic predisposition, consanguinity, and living conditions in Somalia and refugee camps. Frightened, the Somali community has a difficult time understanding this disease, with no Somali word to describe autism. Some parents have responded by sending children back to Somalia to live with relatives while others are refusing vaccinations. ScientificalSly unfounded anti-vaccine campaigns are targeting Somali families.

As clinicians, we are responsible for providing culturally sensitive care. There are numerous additional challenges in accurately diagnosing and educating immigrant families about a neurodevelopmental disease such as autism. The lack of culturally sensitive resources in non-English languages limits access for many families. The implications of not understanding this disease can be enormous, including resistance to vaccination in high risk populations and differential treatment of children with autism based on misconceptions that the disease is contagious or can be treated by returning the child to their homeland.

**RESOURCES FOR CULTURALLY EFFECTIVE AUTISM INFORMATION:**

* **Access for Autistic Youth** cultural.org/aay *Information about autism in several languages and provides support for non-English speaking communities in King county*.
* **University of Washington Autism Center** depts.washington.edu/uwautism/ *University-based multi-disciplinary center for clinical services, research and advocacy*
* **Medical Home: Culturally-effective care** <http://www.medicalhome.org/physicians/multicul_fam.cfm> *Sources of support from WA State Medical Home*

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