

One in four autistic doctors have attempted suicide, new study shows

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A quarter (24%) of autistic doctors have attempted suicide, and more than three-quarters (77%) have considered it, according to a new study by Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS), Thomas Jefferson

University and Autistic Doctors international (ADI)—published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. Nearly half (49%) had also engaged in self harm.

Lead author Dr. Sebastian Shaw, Lecturer in Medical Education at BSMS and the Research Lead of ADI, said, "While it is deeply concerning to see the extent to which my fellow autistic doctors have struggled with their [mental health](#), it is perhaps not surprising when we consider the many barriers and challenges faced by [autistic people](#) working in the health care sector."

"We also found that those who considered [autism](#) to be a 'disorder,' rather than a difference or disability, were more likely to have attempted suicide. This may reflect a degree of internalized shame from being trained to understand autism as a disorder through their [medical practice](#). This association would seem to support a neurodiversity-affirmative view of autism. Fostering more acceptance of autism as a difference may potentially improve the well-being of autistic health care professionals and patients alike."

The study also found that many autistic doctors did not disclose their diagnosis in the workplace, with 29% not having told anyone at work, 32% having disclosed being autistic to their supervisor and 30% to their colleagues. Linked to this appears to be a sense of isolation. Although four fifths reported having worked with another doctor they suspected was autistic, only one fifth reported having worked with another doctor they knew was autistic.

Those having never worked with any suspected autistic colleagues were also more likely to have considered suicide.

As awareness and diagnosis of autism grow, more [medical students](#) and doctors are discovering they are autistic; the study showed an average age of formal diagnosis of 36. Some were diagnosed following

difficulties in stressful clinical environments, or highly demanding [career paths](#)—and found that support from employers was inconsistent, with some colleagues refusing to believe a qualified doctor could be autistic.

Dr. Shaw added, "Key to improving the experience of autistic doctors is ensuring that neurodivergence is viewed in a positive light. Workplaces need to provide better support and improve awareness of autistic health care professionals. Employing a well-supported and neurodiverse medical workforce will mean that the diversity of the public is reflected in their medical providers, with likely improved experiences and outcomes for neurodivergent patients."

Despite these striking findings, overall, three quarters usually enjoyed their work as doctors (74%) and three quarters (73%) felt being autistic was helpful in their role as doctors.

Dr. Mary Doherty, senior author and founder of ADI, commented, "Autistic doctors are a hidden minority in the medical workforce, and the range of specialties in ADI challenges autistic stereotypes. General practitioners are the largest subgroup, followed by psychiatrists."

Dr. Wendy Ross, Director of the Jefferson Center for Autism and Neurodiversity, added, "This study is a call to action for the entire medical field to meet the needs of autistic medical talent as well as patients."

The cross-sectional study, the first to gauge the experience of autistic doctors, modified a pre-existing survey of autistic school staff, with 225 members of the organization ADI taking part in the study.

The work is published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychiatry*.

More information: Sebastian C. K. Shaw et al, The experiences of autistic doctors: a cross-sectional study, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2023).
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