

**The Northern Echo**  
The North's campaigning newspaper

Founded 1870 Issue No 45,551

## COMMENT

### By George what a story!

A GREAT news story has the power to stop you in your tracks.

The announcement that George Osborne has been appointed editor of the Evening Standard was that kind of story.

In that sense yesterday represented a great first day in the office for the Standard's new boy, as he helped to generate a world class story that was quickly trending on social media. The fact that he was at the centre of the story will not bother proprietor, Evgeny Lebedev a jot. A great exclusive can be worth a great amount of money to media organisations and Mr Osborne has box office appeal. For the next few months his every editorial decision will be closely watched which is likely to boost the paper's online audience.

His business contacts built up during his time at Number 11 will also come in handy when the paper tries to woo advertisers and curry favour. There is undoubtedly some commercial merit in his appointment but otherwise it is a puzzling move.

Editors are more than mere figureheads. They need a firm grasp of defamation laws or they might find themselves in very hot water. As editor Mr Osborne will be held personally responsible if one of his reporters breaks libel laws. In some cases this could result in him being arrested, charged, and even serving time in prison. Now that would be one heck of a story.

The fear of making such a mistake gives all editors sleepless nights, but Mr Osborne's is likely to rely on the current staff at the paper to help him navigate the minefield of what you can and cannot print in a newspaper. That is hardly fair on them. Nor is it fair or right for him to combine the job with roles that pose potential conflicts of interest. We hope Monday's Standard leads on the story of: 'Former chancellor quits as MP'. It will show that Mr Osborne is taking his new job seriously.

 **What do you think?**  
[echo@nne.co.uk](mailto:echo@nne.co.uk)

**Write to:** The Editor, Hear All Sides,  
The Northern Echo, PO Box 14, Priestgate,  
Darlington, DL1 1NF.

**Fax:** 01325-360754

**email:** [echo@nne.co.uk](mailto:echo@nne.co.uk)

### The Northern Echo Daily average audience

**Print** 68,281

Source: JICREG November 1, 2015

**Online** 58,663

Source: ABCE Jul - Dec 2015

**TOTAL** 126,944

#### QUALITY

If you have any comments or suggestions about the print quality of today's copy of **The Northern Echo**, please contact our customer care department on 01325-505151.

# Autism outlook getting brighter



**RESEARCH:** Scanning the brains of babies at risk may tell us whether they are more likely to develop autism

**O**NE day we may be able to predict which children will go on to develop autism, even before they demonstrate the first symptoms of the disease.

By scanning the brains of high-risk babies, defined as those with an older sibling with diagnosed autistic spectrum disorder, at six and 12 months old, researchers were able to detect those characteristic changes, namely an overgrowth in the size of the brain in the first year of life, which are associated with the development of autism.

And although the sample size was relatively small, 80 per cent of those babies with the brain changes on magnetic resonance imaging were later diagnosed as autistic, with only three per cent of scans incorrectly predicting that the child would go on to develop the disorder.

This is potentially very important research as currently most diagnoses of autism are made between the age of two and four, and after numerous evaluations, often by several healthcare professionals, sometimes with much distress to the child as well as parents.

Sadly, the rigid behaviours and disabilities associated with autism may be well established by this point, making them exceptionally difficult to manage and modify. Identifying such children at an age before these take hold might make treatment easier with a better short and long term outlook for the patient and family as well.

Although the idea of the autistic savant, a person with very limited social abilities but an amazing skill, for example being able to remember the exact order of several decks of playing cards, as portrayed so memorably by Dustin Hoffman in the film *Rain Man*, does occur, it is not the norm.

There are three sets of features associated with autism. These are impaired social interaction, for example not being able to read social cues or suffering intense stress in a new social situation. Affected children may not naturally play with other children, or worse become agitated or violent when approached to be included in play.

Abnormal communication is the second symptom. Some sufferers have very limited vocabulary or a bank of remembered phras-



With World Autism Awareness Week just around the corner (March 27 to April 2), North-East GP **Dr Zak Uddin** examines exciting new research into an illness brought to the public conscience in the award-winning film, *Rain Man*

es which are repeated often without any relation to the conversation. Some sufferers are unable to speak.

Rigid behaviour completes the triad and may include lining items up in colour or order of shape or size, or having unbreakable routines, which if disturbed result in great anxiety and distress. Naturally these are on a spectrum, with some individuals affected worse than others.

With around 700,000 people in the UK diagnosed with autism, this is roughly one in every 100 individuals. Genetic factors are strongly predictive of autism, with a 20 per cent chance of the disease if you have an older sibling with diagnosed autistic spectrum disorder. This rises to a massive 90 per cent in twins conceived from the same egg. Factors both during pregnancy, for example certain medications, as well as after birth, such as infection, can influence the development of autism.

It is important to state that there is no proven link between the MMR vaccine and autism and this should not deter parents from allowing their children a potentially lifesaving immunisation.

Although there is no cure for autism, this does not necessarily mean that the outlook is completely bleak. The first step is identification of any concerns and review by a healthcare professional specifically trained in autism, with a robust diagnosis as appropriate.

Once diagnosed, much can be done to assist including behavioural and psychological therapies to improve functioning and social interaction, as well as speech and language therapies. Other illnesses often accompany autism including anxiety and depression, and treating these may also result in an improvement in the symptoms of autism.

It is heart-warming to hear that there is a much greater awareness and understanding of autism among the non-medical community, with certain supermarkets having designated autism shopping hours, where the lights are dimmed and music is stopped so that parents with autistic children can take them shopping with less risk of distress caused by the sensory overload most people now take for granted. Indeed, one holiday company is now offering autistic-friendly family holidays.

If you are concerned that your child may have features of autistic spectrum disorder, your GP will be able to discuss your concerns, and refer you to the correct specialist as required.

With many local and national events during World Autism Awareness Week, why not become involved to boost your understanding of an increasingly recognised condition?

**USEFUL WEBSITES**  
[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)  
[www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)

**'It is heart-warming to hear that there is greater awareness and understanding of autism among the non-medical community'**