Question 4: Which Interventions Will Improve Quality of Life?

Aspirational Goal: Develop a range of interventions that optimize function and abilities across the lifespan to maximize quality of life for people on the autism spectrum.

Introduction

The evolution of the Aspirational Goal for this chapter reflects the progression of priorities in the autism community. Over the past several years, the IACC's focus has shifted from "preventing disabilities", to encouraging "building adaptive skills", and now emphasizes the construction of lifespan approaches and utilization of more meaningful intervention outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. This change is driven by the recognition that the goal of autism interventions is not the erasure of autistic people and their identities. Rather, the goal of interventions is to improve the health and well-being of people on the autism spectrum. To achieve this goal, researchers, service providers, and policy makers must seek out and include autistic voices and incorporate the diverse lived experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families in the research and implementation of autism interventions to maximize quality of life for all individuals across the autism spectrum.

Research in recent years has focused on the development and improvement of autism interventions that can enhance quality of life for people on the autism spectrum. With increased understanding of the genetic and molecular basis of autism, there have been many clinical trials testing the therapeutic efficacy of molecules and medications to enhance function and manage co-occurring conditions. Great strides have also been made in behavioral and developmental interventions, with a number of naturalistic interventions leading to improvements in language and social skills development in randomized clinical trials. Technological advances have also allowed the development of more communication and social training tools for autistic individuals and improved access to interventions for some underserved communities. These are all promising advances in autism intervention with the potential to improve the health and well-being of people on the autism spectrum and their families.

Though progress is being made in several areas for interventions, there is a continuing need for improvements and interventions for areas with little or no coverage, such as interventions for sensory issues and interventions targeting adults. There are also many challenges. Behavioral and developmental intervention studies suffer from relatively small sample sizes and potential bias in the reporting of outcomes, and more randomized controlled trials with larger samples are needed to determine the efficacy and effectiveness of many interventions. Disparities in access to interventions also remain for ethnic and racial minority groups and others from underserved communities. Prioritizing understanding which interventions work and for whom will allow us to develop new and improve on existing interventions to meet the diverse needs of all individuals across the autism spectrum as they progress through the lifespan.

Medical and Pharmacological Interventions

Pharmacological Interventions

Only two medications, risperidone and aripiprazole, currently have Food and Drug Administration (FDA) indication for use in autism, specifically to address irritability. There are no approved pharmacological interventions that address challenges such as social communication difficulties and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities.

Advances in genetics and neurobiology have led to an increase in the number of clinical trials testing medical interventions for autism.[1, 2] However, no new drugs so far have succeeded in clinical trials since the *2016-2017 IACC Strategic Plan* was published. For example, the neuropeptides oxytocin and vasopressin are known to be involved in social cognition and have been investigated in a number of autism studies.[3] Multiple clinical trials have now been conducted with intranasal oxytocin, but the results do not indicate a significant improvement in social functioning compared to placebo.[4-8] Large clinical trials for balovaptan, a vasopressin V1a receptor antagonist, also did not show significant results compared to placebo controls.[9-11]

Several major challenges exist when conducting clinical trials for autism. Given the range and variability of challenges people on the autism spectrum may face, additional research efforts must be directed to increase study sizes and group individuals with similar traits and challenges together. In addition, current outcome measures for changes in social functioning that are used to judge whether an intervention worked or not rely on self or caregiver report. Such self-reported measures may be highly subject to bias and the placebo effect, where trial participants may report feeling better than what is indicated when the intervention effect is measured through an objective method, such as a blood test or laboratory measurement. Biomarkers and more objective and sensitive reporting tools need to be developed to collect more accurate data.

Efforts should also be made to determine how genetic factors may influence the response to different medications, paving the way for precision medicine and personalized pharmacological interventions in autism. In particular, advances in the study and treatment of Rett syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and tuberous sclerosis complex have laid the groundwork for similar mechanism-based treatment trials in genetic disorders associated with autism. However, translating success from animal studies has not been straightforward to date, and intellectual disability commonly found in individuals with these neurogenetic disorders can pose ethical and logistical obstacles in designing studies in this field.

In fact, many of the drug trials in autism exclude individuals with intellectual disability and very young children due to ethical and/or practical challenges. However, a mechanism-based intervention intended to improve social and communication challenges associated with autism may be more effective if administered relatively early in life and may be most effective in those with higher support needs. Thus, it is crucial that such individuals are included in upcoming trials. This will require researchers to carefully consider how interventions can be adapted to accommodate individuals across the entirety of the autism spectrum and of all ages and identify age- and ability-appropriate outcomes and outcome measures.

Noninvasive Brain Stimulation

Noninvasive brain stimulation (NIBS) methods, specifically transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) and transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), are potentially promising methods for identifying neural mechanisms and enhancing brain function in autism.[12] TMS can offer a non-invasive tool to study aspects of brain differences in autism and intervene in aspects of autism such a repetitive behaviors and executive function by modulating brain plasticity and network activity. In particular, repetitive TMS (rTMS) can alter brain excitability and network activity beyond the duration of a stimulation session and is being examined as an intervention that could potentially improve social skills, as well as communication, cognitive, and learning skills. tDCS induces neuronal plasticity by altering membrane

potential, and its effects can also last beyond the intervention session, depending on the duration and intensity of the stimulation.

Recent reviews of studies using NIBS indicate improvements in restricted, repetitive behavior and executive functioning, as well as changes in the objective measure of brain wave patterns.[13-15] However, the clinical applications of these methods still cannot be determined as many studies were open-label trials, where participants knew which intervention they were receiving. Additionally, the controlled trials used neurotypical individuals as opposed to faux stimulation as a control. Therefore, better study designs are needed to determine the true effectiveness of TMS and tDCS as an intervention for autism. Additionally, NIBS trials must expand the pool of study participants to include individuals of all ages across the autism spectrum, and longitudinal studies need to determine what the long-term outcomes are following brain stimulation. Data on safety and side effects also need to be carefully assessed and reported. Though preliminary results indicate that NIBS is safe,[16] very few studies include detailed data on experienced side effects. These are important considerations for future studies to improve the tolerability and feasibility of NIBS interventions.

Stem Cell Therapy

Stem cell technology is advancing our understanding of typical and atypical neurobiological processes, thereby offering potential new opportunities for treating neurodevelopmental disorders and co-occurring conditions, including in autism. Some studies suggest that the pathophysiology of autism may involve immune dysregulation and neuroinflammation.[17] Stem cell therapies are thought to modulate immune system activity and facilitate neural connectivity and are being tested as interventions for autism, with the goal of improving issues such as social communication.[18, 19] Stem cells used in trials are derived from sources such as bone marrow and cord blood. While some small studies have been conducted reporting positive results,[18-21] there have also been ethical concerns about this area of research related to financial conflicts of interest among those conducting studies and inadequate ethics review of the study protocols.[22, 23] Though there are companies already marketing stem cell therapies, this research is only just beginning, and there are many hurdles to overcome and unanswered questions to address before the field will know whether stem cell therapy can be a safe and effective intervention for autism. Future studies will need to use standardized and validated outcome measures with large samples to ensure that results are unambiguous and reproducible. Additionally, more research is needed to determine the proper dosage and cell source to be used in stem cell therapies and if they are effective. This will be an important area of investigation to monitor as researchers work to answer these questions and replicate and expand initial findings.

Behavioral and Developmental Interventions

Behavioral and developmental interventions are a prominent part of the lives of many young children on the autism spectrum. These interventions typically seek to take advantage of the neural plasticity in early development to help autistic children develop the strengths and life skills necessary for learning and participation. Indeed, recent data shows that pre-emptive interventions before a formal diagnosis may lead to long-term positive outcomes.[24] Many behavioral and developmental interventions for formally diagnosed children on the autism spectrum have been reported to lead to significant improvements in intelligence quotient (IQ), language, and social functioning domains.[25, 26]

However, given the number of different available interventions, it can be overwhelming for caregivers to choose the most effective intervention for their child. Additionally, some methods call for over 20 hours

per week of interventions, which may be cost-prohibitive for some families. A recent randomized controlled trial comparing different intervention types and intensities did not find differences in outcomes for young children on the autism spectrum,[27] while a meta-analysis of studies on autism interventions found that most studies were subject to significant bias of various kinds, including detection, reporting, and performance bias.[26] These findings highlight the need to compare the effectiveness of different intervention approaches and determine what interventions work best and how using larger, better designed, and more rigorous randomized controlled trials.

Relatedly, it is important to recognize that interventions may not be equally effective or necessary for all individuals on the autism spectrum. Given the heterogeneous nature of autism, individuals across the autism spectrum experience diverse challenges and have varied strengths and may respond differently to and need different interventions. Additionally, the strengths and needs of autistic individuals may change over time. Therefore, long-term follow-up of interventions to determine quality of life outcomes and development of interventions for adolescents and adults are important areas of future research. Ultimately, a better understanding of what interventions work best, for whom, when, and how will allow all individuals across the autism spectrum to fully develop their strengths and maximize their quality of life.[28]

Applied Behavior Analysis

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is the most commonly practiced behavioral intervention for autism. Current ABA practices include the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS), Discrete Trial Training (DTT), and Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT),[29] and the basic premise for all of these methods is positive reinforcement of desired behaviors to develop necessary skills and reduce undesirable behaviors such as self-injurious behaviors. Meta-analysis of studies using ABA showed significant improvements in socialization, communication, and expressive language,[29] though few well-designed randomized controlled trials exist to definitively show the impact of ABA interventions on social and developmental outcomes.[26]

Historically, ABA was developed to teach autistic children to behave in a neurotypical manner. ABA also previously used negative reinforcements to discourage undesirable behaviors, such as repetitive behaviors; however, there is recognition now that some of these behaviors are rooted in the needs and sensory experiences of individuals and should not be discouraged. Current practices have shifted away from negative reinforcements, focusing instead on rewarding resourceful behaviors and outcomes. Regardless, this legacy has led to controversy around the use of ABA in the autism community.[30] Some members of the autism self-advocacy community and the broader autism community argue that autism is part of what makes people on the autism spectrum unique and should be accepted and celebrated. Others object to ABA's focus on eliminating certain behaviors, particularly self-soothing behavior such as hand flapping, without acknowledging the emotional purpose those behaviors serve.

ABA has been greatly expanded upon and changed since its inception. In comparison to DTT, which was a rigid, clinician-led intervention, current models such as PRT and ESDM allow the children to take the lead and is much more focused on play, developing necessary skills, and reducing self-injurious and aggressive behaviors. To alleviate concerns in the community, larger randomized controlled trials and more research should be conducted to definitively demonstrate the potential benefits and harms of ABA interventions, and efforts need to be made to prevent any possible negative effects of ABA. The goals of ABA should also be decided by the person receiving the intervention or, if they are unable to

communicate their goals, their caregivers and guardians. Researchers and clinicians should also recognize that ABA simply may not be suited for some individuals on the autism spectrum, and, in such cases, they should be pointed to other forms of interventions to meet their goals and maximize their quality of life.

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs) are based on ABA principles but use a strengths-based model to teach skills in a developmental sequence and in a naturalistic environment, such as during play or other daily activities, with natural rewards (for example, when the child says "car", being rewarded with a toy car as opposed to a piece of candy).[31] Examples of NBDIs include ESDM, PRT, and Joint Attention Symbolic Play Engagement and Regulation (JASPER). These approaches emphasize the integration of knowledge and skills across developmental domains and are taught in a social context that is emotionally meaningful to the individual. Meta-analysis of autism intervention literature showed that NDBIs are the most well supported by randomized controlled trials, indicating it has great promise to support social communication, language, and play skills development.[26, 32]

Despite data supporting the effectiveness of NDBIs, a recent survey of behavior professionals indicated that most had no knowledge of NDBIs and few believed it to be appropriate or effective.[33] Therefore, more training and outreach to service providers are needed to implement NDBIs. In addition, it is unclear what components of NDBIs are necessary for improvements in social communication, language, and play skills development. Additional randomized controlled trials on a larger scale are needed to determine what the key components of NDBIs are for success. Future research should also address what the long-term gains are following NDBI and how to improve NDBIs to facilitate the development of skills and strengths across the lifespan.

Interventions in the Classroom

School-aged children spend much of their day in the classroom, and autistic children may struggle with sensory, social, and cognitive issues that make learning difficult. Thus, researchers are increasingly developing and testing interventions in school-based settings, from preschool through high school.[34, 35] Studies indicate that these interventions are effective at increasing classroom engagement,[36] improving socialization,[37] and reducing disruptive behavior.[38] As a whole, these and other findings highlight the effectiveness of teacher-implemented interventions in school settings on improving the educational experience for children on the autism spectrum and pave the way for more school-based intervention research. Future research should explore how to best balance academic programming with special education interventions to develop needed life skills and improve social communication and transition preparedness. Additionally, schools should ensure that teachers and other school personnel have the training and support necessary to successfully implement interventions in the classroom. Peer-mediated interventions have also proven to be successful,[39] and increased implementation of these types of interventions can decrease the burden on educators while also providing a more inclusive environment for autistic students. Finally, disparities in funding and resources for autism interventions in schools, particularly in underserved communities, will also need to be addressed.

Family-Mediated Interventions

As diagnostic advances have made it possible to identify children on the autism spectrum at earlier ages, researchers have tested a number of parent- and sibling-mediated interventions in order to meet the need for interventions that can be implemented as early as possible. Studies show that family-mediated

interventions can facilitate social, cognitive, and language development in children on the autism spectrum,[40-43] and the presence of a sibling greatly increases development of adaptive skills.[44] Additionally, active hands-on parent coaching is more effective than parent education models where the same information is provided without active coaching.[40] Caregiver-mediated intervention can also be cost-effective and reinforcing of family support.

Continued research is needed on how to best train parents and caregivers to provide effective and efficient interventions for their child, recognizing that parents and caregivers may already be overburdened and may only have limited resources to devote to training and implementation. Additionally, training for parents should evolve over time as the needs and strengths of their child changes. Future research should also explore how training involving the whole family, including siblings, may be helpful in further facilitating the development of children on the autism spectrum. Caregiver skills training has been developed for some specific populations, including the Autism Speaks and Color of Autism's partnership on the World Health Organization Caregiver Skills Training Program that provides caregiver skills training support in international and U.S. communities, with a focus on low-resource settings.

Complementary and Alternative Approaches

Complementary and alternative interventions have also been used by some in the autism community. These include interventions such as special diets (e.g., gluten-free, casein-free) and supplements, probiotics, plant-based and herbal medicines, and animal and alternative therapies. Studies of the effect of special diets and supplements on social skills and restricted, repetitive behavior have had mixed results, and data so far is not strong enough to support the recommendation of such interventions for individuals on the autism spectrum.[45-48] The number of studies on this topic suggests there is great interest in further understanding how nutritional status may relate to autism presentation. Future studies should be more rigorously designed and include more participants with longer follow-up periods to provide conclusive evidence as to the efficacy of special diets and supplements in improving quality of life for people on the autism spectrum.

Results for the effect of probiotics are similarly mixed, with randomized controlled trials showing no effect on autism symptom severity, though studies with prebiotic supplementation seem to produce more consistent results.[49, 50] More rigorous and better designed randomized controlled trials with larger and more diverse samples are needed to provide insight into how probiotics and prebiotics may improve autism symptoms. Additionally, while these interventions are generally considered safe in the short-term, the long-term effects of these interventions are not known, and future studies should be conducted on the safety of these interventions and any potential long-term side effects.

The number and severity of side effects associated with commonly prescribed pharmaceuticals have led to increased interest in plant-based medicines and herbal remedies as interventions for both core traits of autism and co-occurring conditions. Plant-based compounds such as cannabinoids, resveratrol, curcumin, and those found in green tea extract show promising therapeutic effects for autism in preliminary studies.[51, 52] However, the exact benefits and side effects of these compounds still need to be established using carefully designed large clinical trials.

Approaches such as mindfulness, art therapy, animal-assisted interventions, and yoga have been used to improve emotional regulation, enhance social relationships, and reduce aggression and irritability.[53-59]

Results of studies so far seem to indicate that art and music therapy may be useful in promoting nonverbal expression and improving communication,[54, 59] and dance therapy may improve social functioning and intimate relationships between adults.[55, 60] Some studies indicate that equine-assisted interventions and horseback riding may also improve social communication and behavioral skills.[53, 61, 62] However, limited effects have been found for other animal-assisted therapies and mindfulness-based approaches.[53, 57, 58] Studies on these alternative interventions tend to be small with a limited number of participants followed for a short window of time. Larger, better powered, more rigorous studies are needed to determine what the short- and long-term benefits these alternative approaches may have for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Lastly, sensory hyperreactivity and hyporeactivity are common in individuals on the autism spectrum and can impact quality of life.[63-66] However, very few sensory-based interventions have been studied for individuals on the autism spectrum, and the available interventions show little evidence to support their effectiveness.[26] Much more research is needed to develop appropriate and effective interventions to improve sensory outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Technology-Based Interventions and Communication Tools

Digital-based technology interventions for individuals on the autism spectrum have continued to increase in accessibility, breadth, and depth of use. Scientific evidence for the effectiveness of technology-based or technology-enhanced interventions has increased, with a large number of randomized controlled trials highlighting the breadth of technological applications in autism research as well as their increasing rigor. Technology-based interventions have tremendous potential to benefit individuals on the autism spectrum in many ways, including by helping them improve social and communication skills and gain greater independence, all of which can improve the overall quality of life.

Telehealth, which uses technologies such as videoconferencing to allow specialists and care providers to deliver interventions remotely, has becoming increasingly popular in recent years.[67-69] Within the autism community, telehealth programs typically rely on specialists to provide training and supervision to teachers, clinicians, and caregivers of children on the autism spectrum. This remote training has proven to be effective and led to significant improvements in child outcomes.[67] Telehealth is a promising and cost-effective way of delivering needed interventions to a broader swath of the autism community, particularly those living in rural areas for whom specialists may not be within easy reach. However, more large-scale randomized controlled trials are needed to better understand the effectiveness of telehealth interventions. Additionally, most studies on telehealth are focused on children and improving communication skills and decreasing challenging behavior. Future studies should expand to include autistic individuals of all ages and explore other areas of intervention such as social skills (e.g., joint attention) or for co-occurring conditions.

Extended reality (XR) technology, encompassing both virtual and augmented reality, gives users an immersive and interactive environment. Rapid advancements in XR technology over the past few years have led to its increased use in leisure gaming and education. The use of XR technology has also been explored in providing interventions to individuals on the autism spectrum to improve social communication skills, emotion regulation and control, and daily living skills, with positive results so far.[69-71] Additionally, XR interventions are typically well-tolerated and accepted by both autistic individuals and their caregivers.[69] However, improvements still can be made. The scenarios typically used in XR interventions tend to be limited in both number and scope and very confined, making it

difficult to develop skills needed to adapt to changes. Additionally, because the virtual environment is not the real world, it is difficult to generalize behaviors in XR to the real-world settings. More research is needed on how perceived reality impacts the efficacy of XR interventions and how to overcome those challenges. Larger studies with more diverse participants are also needed to determine if the results so far are reproducible and relevant across the autism spectrum and in diverse racial and ethnic groups. The safety of XR technology and extended use of XR technology must also be carefully studied.

Robot-assisted technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have been tested in recent years to assist individuals on the autism spectrum with developing learning and social skills.[72-78] Most studies using robots and artificial intelligence report positive improvements and outcomes following intervention and therapy, showing that this is a promising area of future research. Additional trials are needed to determine the reproducibility and generalizability of these results, and future studies should consider long-term follow-up to determine how long improvements last. Considerations should also be given to intervention areas beyond learning and social skills development and how to tailor robots to the specific needs of each autistic individual.

Given the ubiquity of smart phones and personal tablets, mobile applications (apps) are increasingly popular and accessible and are being used for a variety of autism interventions, including speech therapy, improving communication, and building social skills.[79-83] Studies of the use of apps to facilitate skills building have reported improvements in communication and social interactions, and participants typically report greater interest and motivation to participate in the intervention. App developers should use training materials that reflect real-world situations to ensure that skills are translatable, and that programming is adjustable with improvements in skill development. Future studies should also explore how AI can be used to in apps to monitor body language and performance.

Wearable technologies such as smart watches have become more commonplace and are now being tested for a variety of uses for individuals on the autism spectrum. So far, wearable technology has mostly been used to gather information on different physiological processes.[84, 85] This information can be useful in predicting episodes of aggression or increased stress and anxiety.[86-91] Wearable technology has also been used to facilitate effective communication and improve socialization by detecting facial expressions, allowing mentors to provide virtual prompts in social situations, and learning and interpreting gestures made by autistic children.[92-94] In addition, wearable sensors can be used to monitor co-occurring conditions such as epilepsy to facilitate timely care.[95, 96] Research on how wearable technology can be used for autism and co-occurring conditions interventions is just beginning. The preliminary results so far need to be validated in larger randomized controlled trials, and more research is necessary on the long-term efficacy and safety of using wearable technology.

Many individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulties with spoken and verbal communication. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools are increasingly adapted to allow both speaking and nonspeaking individuals to communicate with others more effectively. Assisted modalities of AAC including PECS and speech generating devices (SGDs) have been particularly useful,[97] especially for functional communication such as making requests.[98] More research is needed on how to use AAC and other interventions to facilitate communication of more complex ideas. Additionally, AAC use has traditionally been prescribed only after other interventions to induce verbal speech has failed. However, evidence suggests that AAC use may in fact facilitate improvements in spoken communication.[99] Therefore, research is needed on when the introduction of AAC can be most impactful in promoting

both spoken and unspoken communication. Efforts also need to be made to remove barriers to AAC use, including ensuring that AAC use is normalized[100] and validated in educational and health care settings so all individuals on the autism spectrum can communicate effectively.

Technology-based interventions and tools have become increasingly effective, important, and useful. Yet a number of challenges and gaps have been highlighted above. Several concerns are also shared across many of these technologies. For example, with cloud data storage and transfer becoming more common, data privacy and confidentiality issues will need to be addressed when using and developing technology-based tools. Additionally, many of these technologies, including robot-assisted technology and AAC, require training for caregivers, teachers, and clinicians for effective use. More efforts are needed to ensure that such training is available and accessible and that tools are developed with usability in mind. Importantly, some families may not have access to the basic resources, such as stable high-speed internet, necessary to take advantage of these interventions and tools. Efforts need to be made to ensure that technology-based interventions, like all interventions, are accessible for everyone in the autism community, particularly for those in underserved communities.

Interventions for Co-occurring Conditions

A number of treatment trials target co-occurring conditions in autism. This is a particularly important area of research as the presence of a co-occurring mental health condition is predictive of lower quality of life for autistic individuals.[101] Pharmacological interventions for co-occurring conditions in autistic individuals typically involve prescription of drugs tested and approved for the co-occurring condition alone.[102] For example, children with both epilepsy and autism are treated with anti-epileptic drugs such as valproic acid,[102] and autistic children with ADHD are given stimulants such as methylphenidate.[103] However, these drugs have been associated with significant side effects in individuals on the autism spectrum, who may be more sensitive to adverse reactions. Therefore, careful analyses need to be conducted to ensure that medications prescribed for co-occurring conditions are safe in autistic individuals, and additional pharmacological alternatives are needed to ensure that individuals on the autism spectrum can treat co-occurring conditions effectively with minimal side effects.

In addition to pharmacological interventions, psycho-social interventions may also be effective for some co-occurring conditions. For example, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) has been shown to be an effective treatment for anxiety, including for children and adults on the autism spectrum.[104-107] However, anxiety and other mental health conditions may present differently in autistic individuals versus neurotypical controls. More research is needed to better identify symptoms of anxiety and depression in individuals on the autism spectrum, and interventions tailored for autistic individuals may be more helpful than just baseline treatments. In addition, efforts so far have been mostly focused on speaking autistic children without intellectual disabilities,[108, 109] limiting the applicability and generalizability of findings. Future studies should ensure that study participants include individuals across the entirety of the autism spectrum and of all ages, including female participants and people from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups.

Placeholder for update on sleep-related research, GI

Outcome Measures and Biomarkers

Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made in the development of new behavioral interventions and identification of novel drug targets aimed at reducing disabilities associated with

autism and improving quality of life across the lifespan. A major challenge in determining whether new treatment approaches are efficacious has been the measurement of treatment response, which are currently mostly reliant on clinician and caregiver reports. In addition, measurement of treatment response is particularly complex in autism due to the heterogeneity resulting from an individual's symptom profile, sex, cognitive and language abilities, and developmental level. Moreover, many existing assessment measures were developed for screening and diagnosis and are not sensitive toward assessing changes in symptoms over time.

Considerable effort has been directed toward evaluating which existing measures are suitable for clinical trials and for developing quantitative, objective, and sensitive measures of intervention response. Increasingly, the input of key stakeholders, including autistic individuals and caregivers, is solicited to ensure that outcome measures reflect the priorities and needs of persons for which the interventions are being developed. Biomarkers of intervention success are needed, as are "stratification" biomarkers for matching people to the best intervention for them at the best time. Until it becomes possible to biologically measure intervention response, negative results from pharmacological and behavioral interventions will be difficult to interpret, and positive results may not definitively indicate the requisite dose or duration of treatment. Predictive biomarkers that help to match individuals to particular interventions will help to create more precise treatments and allow individuals on the autism spectrum and their families to avoid wasted time and resources.

Initial efforts have focused on developing measures that are linked indirectly or directly to underlying neural circuitry, which can offer insight regarding whether the intervention is influencing certain aspects of neural circuitry, inform researchers of the mechanisms that may underlie the intervention effects, and predict intervention response. These measures include eye tracking,[110] electrophysiological responses,[111, 112] and magnetic resonance imaging,[113] among others. Such measures can also serve as an early efficacy signal that can detect response to treatment before changes in more distal measures such as language and social abilities are evident. Early efficacy markers can be used to identify which individuals are most likely to benefit from a given intervention and/or in adaptive study designs to indicate early in the trial whether modifications in the intervention (e.g., timing and intensity) should be made.

Given the high risk of failure for central nervous system intervention studies, there is a need to design early-stage trials to incorporate objective measures that adequately test the proposed mechanism of action of the intervention and determine if the intervention target has been modulated. There is also a need for studies that demonstrate the effect of the intervention on the proposed mechanism of target engagement or site of action (e.g., the molecular, circuit, neural or system-based target) prior to an examination of clinical efficacy (an association with behavioral or clinical benefit). Clinical studies for these intervention targets should be designed so that even negative results will provide meaningful information.

Recently, a number of substantial investments have been made to support large, collaborative efforts aimed at validating biomarkers and outcome measures for use in autism clinical trials. These consortia involve public-private partnerships among academia, advocacy and other non-profit organizations, government, and industry, with a goal of reducing risk of investments into pharmacological autism trials and optimizing the success of such trials. These projects are examining a wide range of potential biomarkers and their relationships with observational and caregiver-report measures of behavior in

large samples of autistic versus neurotypical individuals over time. Furthermore, regular communication, data sharing agreements, and shared measures across the existing consortia will increase the scientific utility of these investments. One example is the Autism Biomarkers Consortium for Clinical Trials (ABC-CT), a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-, Foundation for the NIH-, and Simons Foundation-funded consortium of sites that aims to develop, validate, and disseminate objective measures of social function and communication for autism, with the ultimate goal of advancing these measures as markers and predictors of treatment response.[114]

In sum, multiple laboratories are conducting studies to develop better ways of measuring intervention response. Continued investment in such studies will ensure that, as new behavioral and medical interventions are developed, we will have the capability of testing their efficacy. Such investments will also be essential for developing improved methods for identifying specific populations within the autism community that are responsive to specific interventions and identifying the neural mechanisms underlying intervention response.

Research Policy Issues

There has been an explosion of behavioral intervention studies and advancements in intervention science in recent years, including continued progress in the development and evaluation of multiple intervention types. There are now tremendous opportunities for combining therapeutic modalities in ways that allow for positive impacts from the amalgamation that are greater than the sum of the parts. One example would be the combination of psychopharmacology and behavioral interventions or using technology to facilitate improvements in interventions in the classroom. Advancement of new or reconceptualization of existing interventions into therapies organized into therapeutic modules that can be combined and reused in flexible arrangements can provide finer granularity and more tractable opportunities for understanding change in individuals. This is an area of great need and can especially help address co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, aggression, and depression. The recent Lancet Commission on the future of care and clinical research in autism laid out a stepped care approach that can be personalized to meet the needs of autistic individuals and their families as their strengths and needs evolve over time.[28] Implementation of a stepped care approach can help ensure efficient and equitable distribution of intervention resources, enabling individuals across the autism spectrum to meet their personalized and diverse goals.

Encouragingly, the diversity of study participants in autism intervention research has improved, as researchers more often strive to include underserved communities as well as populations previously excluded or overlooked. However, participants from racial and ethnic minority groups are still underrepresented in autism intervention research,[25, 115] and disparities exist in access to services and interventions.[116, 117] This represents a critical gap in our understanding of how existing interventions may or may not be culturally and linguistically relevant and feasible for autistic individuals from underserved communities. Efforts should be made to include individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups and other underserved communities in intervention research, and culturally and linguistically relevant interventions need to be developed to ensure that all autistic individuals can access effective interventions.

Adolescents and adults are another underserved population in autism intervention research as most intervention studies are still focused on young children. Future research should seek to fill this gap by developing effective interventions for autistic individuals across the lifespan. Given the increased

understanding that girls and women on the autism spectrum face different health challenges compared to autistic boys and men,[101, 118-120] more also needs to be done to ensure that girls and women on the autism spectrum are also included in intervention research and have access to effective and appropriate interventions. Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that autistic individuals with higher support needs, including minimally speaking individuals, are disproportionately excluded from intervention studies.[121] Efforts need to be made to include individuals across the autism spectrum in research so that all autistic people have access to effective interventions, regardless of the level of support needs.

In addition to increasing the diversity of study participants, more research efforts are needed in the area of intervention implementation. A recent systematic review found that clinical guidelines for autism contained recommendations based mostly on expert opinion as opposed to empirical evidence.[122] This finding highlights the continued need to improve translation of research findings and implementation of evidence-based interventions in autism communities. Future resources should be directed towards increasing the accessibility of evidence-based interventions by improving community access to information about the efficacy and safety of different interventions, improving and strengthening the autism service providers workforce, and reducing disparities in intervention access and resources. By focusing on practical barriers to ultimate intervention deployment, including insurance, provider adoption willingness, and marginal expenses, a more robust, efficient, and complete pipeline from idea to effective individual treatment can be realized.

Summary

While there have been multiple, important advances in the field of autism interventions, there is still much progress to be made. Researchers must continue to develop new interventions as well as improve on existing interventions for diverse settings and populations, including males and females, individuals with co-occurring conditions and varying levels of support needs, individuals across the lifespan, and those in settings or communities that are under-resourced or underserved. Efforts must also be made to improve community implementation of evidence-based interventions and improve community access to interventions proven to be effective to maximize quality of life for individuals on the autism spectrum. Importantly, the voices of autistic people and their families must be included in intervention research and implementation, and autistic individuals and their caregivers must be allowed to choose what interventions work best for their unique needs to meet the diverse goals of individuals across the autism spectrum.

Objectives

Objective 1: Develop and improve pharmacological and medical interventions that will maximize positive outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Examples:

- Advance the study and treatment of genetic syndromes related to autism (including, but not limited to, RTT, FXS, and TSC) and utilize the groundwork provided by investigations of these disorders to develop similar mechanism-based, genetically targeted pharmacology treatment trials for autism.
- Explore innovate intervention modalities and combination therapies.

- Development interventions to address challenges across the autism spectrum and across the lifespan
- Investigate intervention response, including how girls and women on the autism spectrum respond differently to intervention approaches, with a focus on the use of cognitive neuroscience tools to examine alternative mechanisms of change underlying symptom change.
- Determine the safety and efficacy of pharmacological interventions for common co-occurring conditions such as depression, ADHD, gastrointestinal disorders, and sleep disorders in autistic populations.
- Develop biomarkers that can help inform decisions about the most appropriate interventions for particular individuals across the autism spectrum and provide objective, early assessments of response to intervention.

Objective 2: Create and improve psychosocial, developmental, naturalistic, and complementary interventions that will maximize positive outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Examples:

- Support research to ensure that interventions are developed to address the whole autism spectrum, the whole lifespan, and diverse populations, including girls and women, minimally speaking individuals, intellectually disabled individuals, adults, and individuals in under-resourced and underserved communities, and that interventions are accessible across settings, communities, and income levels.
- Leverage the neuroplasticity of the developing, adolescent, and adult brain to develop psychosocial interventions targeting these age groups, meeting their specific needs, offering a path toward continued development of life skills, and enhancing quality of life.
- Identify the characteristics and components of, and contributors to successful therapeutic approaches as a basis for future innovation and tailoring of interventions to particular populations or settings.
- Explore combination therapies.
- Develop outcome measures that include biomarkers of treatment success, measures of improvement across multiple domains, and improvements in quality of life.

Objective 3: Develop and improve technology-based interventions that will maximize positive outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum.

Examples:

- Develop tools allowing individuals on the autism spectrum to track and direct their own interventions.
- Develop technology-based interventions that help people on the autism spectrum improve their social and communication skills, increase their independence, and in many other ways help improve the quality of their lives.
- Development interventions for minimally speaking individuals and those with intellectual disabilities, with a focus on the use of technology to augment communication as well as adaptive, individualized intervention approaches for both of these underserved groups.
- Increase access to interventions by developing technology-based interventions that can be deployed outside of primary care or clinical settings.

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