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FSU researcher wins autism grants



Florida State University photo

Amy Wetherby, director of the Autism Institute at the Florida State University College of Medicine, has received a \$2.4 million grant to continue her research on detecting autism disorders in children as young as infants and making autism screening more culturally sensitive.



SUNCOAST NEWS STAFF REPORT

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A researcher at Florida State University has received funding for her efforts to ferret out signs of the baffling neuro-behavioral disorder autism in children as young as toddlers.

Amy Wetherby, director of the Autism Institute at the FSU College of Medicine, has been awarded a pair of grants totaling nearly \$2.4 million. She will use the money to further her development of screening tests for autism.

Wetherby received \$1.9 million from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a unit of the National Institutes of Health.



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Wetherby will use that money to develop an autism screener in collaboration with Eva Petkova, director of biostatistics at the New York University Child Study Center, and Catherine Lord, a clinical psychologist at the University of Michigan Autism and Communication Disorders Center who specializes in autism disorders. In addition, Wetherby is receiving \$465,000 from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders to develop culturally sensitive screening tests for autism spectrum disorders.

Wetherby's First Words Project has been screening young children for years in search of the often subtle signs of ADS can present in youngsters in the first years of life.

"The symptoms themselves can actually impair learning," Wetherby said. "Just like cancer, the earlier we can catch it, the far better the outcomes."

In the United States, it is now rare to diagnose autism disorders in children young that 3. The American Academy of Pediatrics is recommending that children be screen between the ages of 18 and 24 months, but as of yet there is no well-validated screening test for use in pediatric settings.

Wetherby and her colleagues will study and evaluate various screening methods they have developed for use by professionals or parents.

Under the NIDOCDC grant, Wetherby will seek to improve screening methods for African-American and Latino children. On average, autism is diagnosed a year later in these youngsters.

"We're trying to address that disparity by studying cultural differences in the early signs of autism," Wetherby said.

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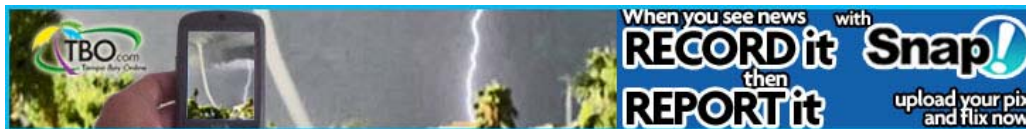
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