New registry identifies more than 300 savants worldwide

MADISON—Savant syndrome is a rare but remarkable condition in which individuals with developmental disabilities, brain injury, or brain disease have some spectacular “islands” of skill or ability that stand in marked contrast to overall handicap, and according to a report in the August issue of WMJ, there are over 300 known cases worldwide.

In “The Savant Syndrome Registry: A Preliminary Report,” researchers Darold Treffert, MD, and David Rebedew, MD, provide analysis of 319 documented cases of the condition, including the percentage of congenital v. acquired cases, male-to-female ratio and distribution of underlying disability.

“Savant syndrome can be congenital or acquired, and it is not a stand-alone condition. Rather, the special savant skills are always grafted on to some underlying disability than can include, but is not limited to, autistic spectrum disorder,” they wrote.

In the registry, 90 percent of individuals have congenital savant syndrome, meaning savant skills have been present since birth or early childhood. Special skills—or “islands of genius”—include art, memory, mathematics and more, with musical ability (performance, composition, perfect pitch and memory) being the most common. The registry also notes that savants were identified in 33 different countries, with a male-to-female incidence ratio of 4:1.

“Since the early description of savant syndrome over 100 years ago, most of the special skills have been in five categories: music, art, calendar calculating, lightning calculating, and visual-spatial/mechanical skills,” they wrote. “While it is true that these skill areas still dominate the inventory of abilities, this broad-based review shows that savant skills can include many other skills as well, such as language, computer, athletic and extrasensory abilities. Some savants have extraordinary memory as their principal skill, but increased memory capacity general accompanies the principal savant ability.”

Doctor Treffert is an internationally known researcher on savant syndrome who served as a consultant for the Academy-award winning film “Rain Man.” More information about his work and savant syndrome is available at www.savantsyndrome.com, a website hosted by the Wisconsin Medical Society.

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