



# Nurse Knowledge of Autism and Aging

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## Background

- The prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in adults and seniors is increasing in the United States, with an incidence of 1 in every 44 individuals.
- Adults with ASD carry a substantial burden from medical comorbidities, thus the provision of care to this population can be complex, resulting in many barriers to receiving satisfactory care.
- Literature suggests that healthcare providers lack the knowledge and adequate preparation needed to provide necessary care to this population, but little is known about nursing knowledge

## Aim

To explore the knowledge and experience level that nurses have when caring for an adult with ASD.

## Procedures

### Method

- Non-Experimental, Descriptive
- Electronic survey using a convenience with targeted and word of mouth sampling to obtain a sample of nurses within the state of New Jersey.
- Email announcements were also sent to members of statewide nurse organizations.

### Inclusion Criteria

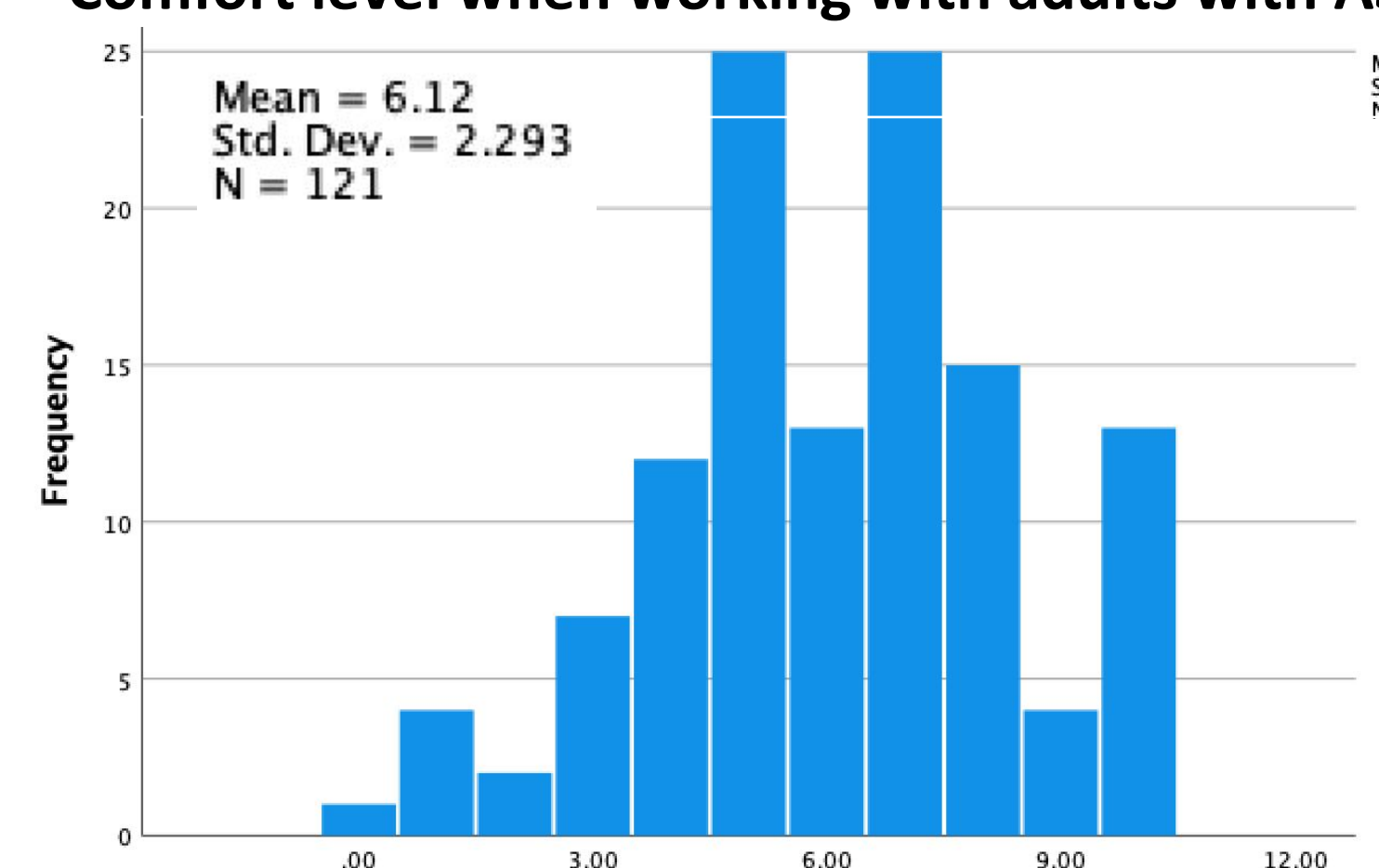
- Licensed nurse (LPN, RN, or APN) currently working in the state of New Jersey.

### Procedure

- A literature review was first conducted on all existing research regarding health providers knowledge on caring for an adult with an ASD.
- A Qualtrics survey was then created based upon an already existing survey by Zerbo et al. (2015), which concluded that healthcare providers (mostly MD sample) have inadequate preparation and skills when working with adult patients with an ASD.
- The survey was a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions that aimed to assess the knowledge and skill level of the participants in regards to providing care to adults with an ASD.
- The Qualtrics survey was sent out and the results were collected and organized through SPSS 27.

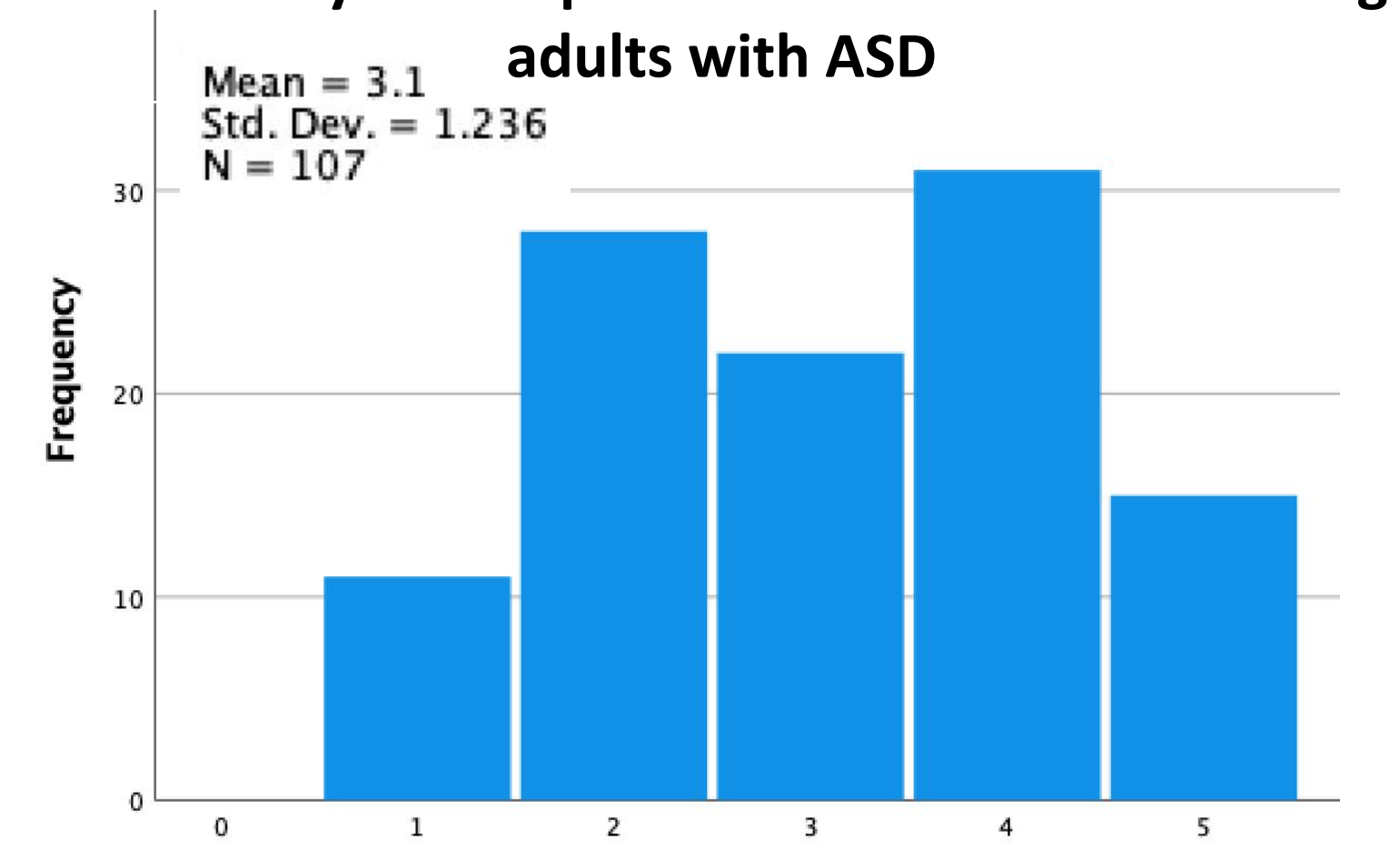
## Results

### Comfort level when working with adults with ASD



How comfortable are you working with an adult (26+) with autism on a scale from 1-10?  
Extremely uncomfortable (1) to Extremely comfortable (10)

### Availability of adequate tools for accommodating adults with ASD



Please rank your level of agreement with the following statement: You have adequate tools/referral sources/practice models to accommodate people with ASD in your practice.  
Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (5)

Requested Resources	N	%
Conference with description of ASD	54	39%
Checklist of community resources for patients with ASD	78	56.5%
Knowledge of psychotropic drugs to treat patients with ASD	74	53.6%
Network of providers to consult with about ASD Toolkit for screening and diagnosis of ASD	80	58%
Training on effective communication strategies with ASD patients	95	68.8%

AHAT Familiarity	N	%
Yes	5	3.6%
No	106	76.8%

## Conclusions

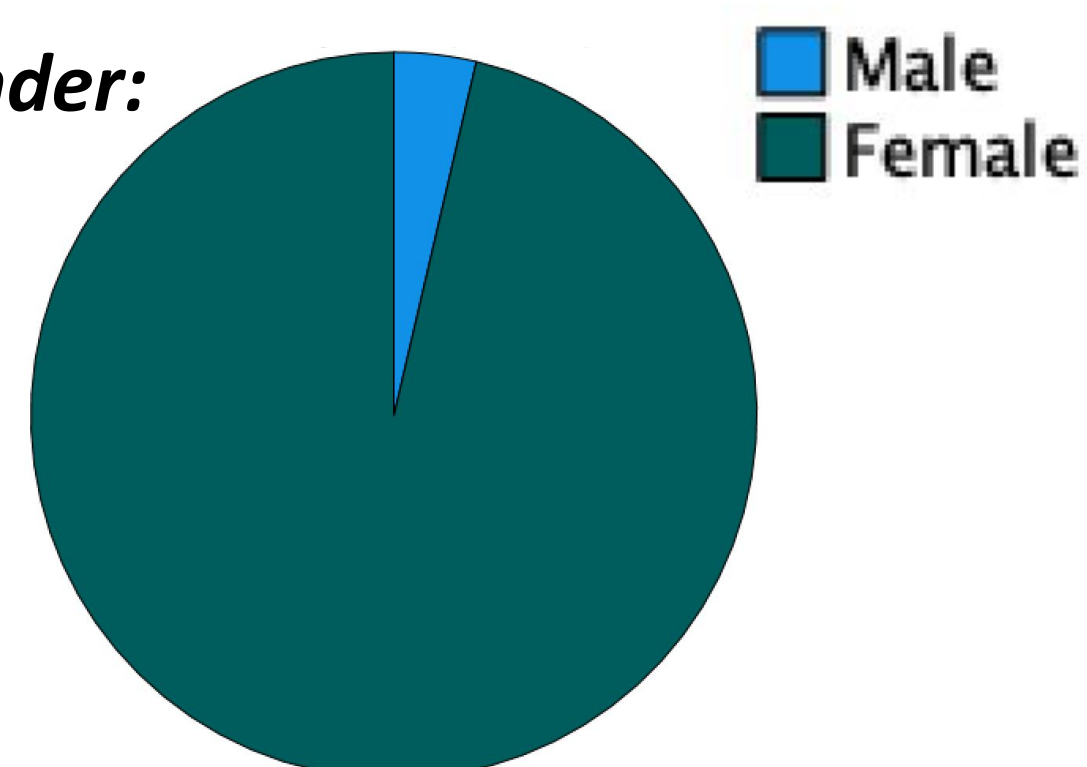
- Only about 1/3 of nurses, or 36.4% of participants, feel they have adequate resources to care for this complex population, while the majority of participants feel they do not.
- The majority of participants reported feeling somewhat uncomfortable working with this population, while some even reported feeling extremely uncomfortable.
- Only 5 participants (3.6%) reported familiarity with the AHAT (Autism Healthcare Accommodation Tool) to ease communication.
- Many participants suggested that they would be interested in learning more about how to care for adults with an ASD and also suggested which resources they feel would be most helpful.
  - 95 participants (68.8%) suggested that training on effective communication strategies for adults with ASD would be useful.

## Sample

Sample Size:  
N= 137

### Participant Gender:

M: 5  
F: 132  
Other: 1

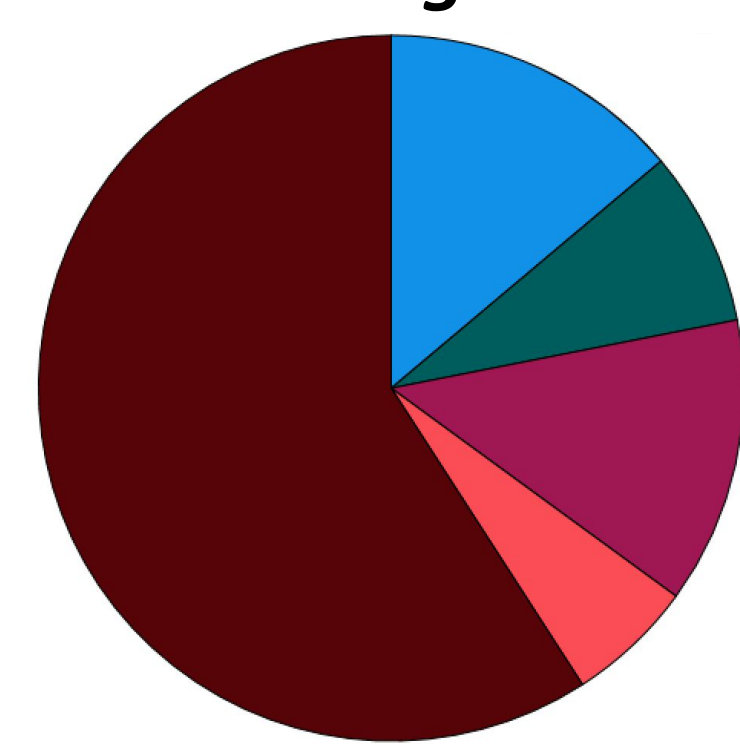


### Level of Degree:

LPN: 1  
RN: 84  
APN: 51

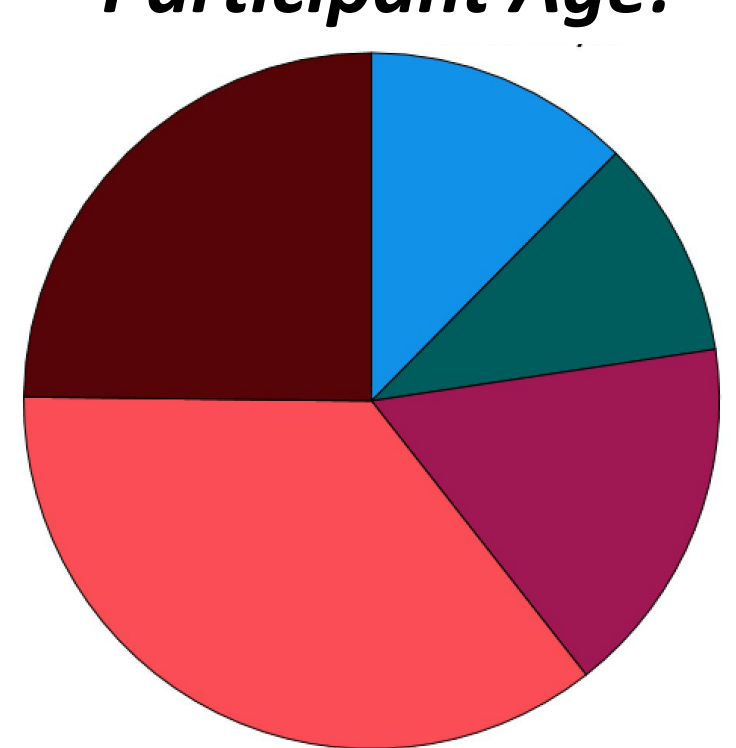
### Years working as a nurse:

0-5  
6-10  
11-15  
16-20  
21+



### Participant Age:

20-30  
31-40  
41-50  
51-60  
61+



## Qualitative Analysis

- What next steps would be taken if the patient with ASD did not have someone to help them answer questions regarding medical or current health history: While several participants left their answer blank or answered "unsure," close to seven themes were present. These themes included **contacting case/social worker, contacting caregiver or next of kin, obtaining past medical records, consulting with expert or provider, reviewing resources, conducting examinations on the patient, and waiting.**
- What difficulties participants have faced while working with and treating an adult with an ASD: While several participants left their answer blank or stated "Not applicable," ten themes were evident. These themes included **difficulties such as patient adherence, communication, lack of experience, lack of time, lack of patient resource, inability to tolerate care environment, unable to conduct a physical examine.** An additional response did state that the participant faced **personal bias.**
- Where and what type of education was received in regards to treating adults with an ASD: Common answers included **education from lectures, personal/work experience, continuing education opportunities, nursing school, and self teaching.** One participant mentioned **not received any education, but would be interested in acquiring more knowledge.**

## Implications

- Even nurses with substantial education and experience feel inadequately resourced to care for this vulnerable population.
- Resources do exist, such as the AHAT, but nurses are unaware of them and healthcare systems should do more to educate nurses about these resources.
- Healthcare systems and educational units should be informed of these findings.
- Schools of Nursing and Nurse Educators should develop resource kits for nursing.
- National level data should be gathered to better understand the level of nurse knowledge and skill for adults with ASD.
- Future research and programming is needed to better understand the impact of resources and education provided to nurses on care outcomes.

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