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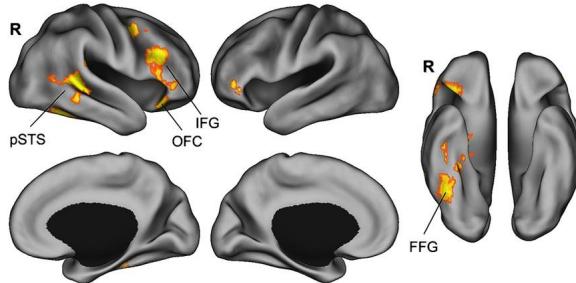
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Autism Researchers Seek More Brains to Study

Four institutions create a consortium to reach potential donors

Biological Motion Perception: TD_{n=24} > ASD_{n=24}



Autism researchers say brain scans offer some lessons, but they also need to work with donated brains. *PHOTO: YALE CENTER FOR TRANSLATIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL NEUROSCIENCE*

By BARBARA SADICK

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One reason autism research hasn't made more progress is a shortage of brains available for study. Brain scans can only take researchers so far—they need to work with donated brains to gain a deeper understanding of the condition.

That's why four research institutions have formed the Autism BrainNet to reach out to potential donors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about one in 68 children in the U.S. has autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, which involves impairments in social communication and repetitive behaviors, and is often associated with general intellectual disability and other medical conditions.

Autism BrainNet is a consortium of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and the University of California, Davis. It has launched an "It Takes Brains" campaign aimed at potential donors of both autistic and

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healthy brains.

Imaging has shown that the brain of a child with autism develops abnormally, but little is known about the underlying cellular, molecular and genetic mechanisms that lead to the onset of autism. The only way to learn more is to have more brains to use for research; the current supply simply isn't large enough to conduct extensive studies. Fewer than 200 brains have ever been collected for this purpose, and only about 30 or 40 have been intensively studied, says David G. Amaral, research director of the UC Davis MIND Institute and director of Autism BrainNet. (MIND stands for Medical Investigation of Neurodevelopmental Disorders.)

The program is seeking brains of donors age 2 to 50. (After 50, the complications of aging start to appear.) Researchers have found it particularly difficult to find donors of the brains of very young children, which are crucial to understanding the alterations that lead to autism, says Dr. Amaral.

At the moment, he says, the best treatment for autism is behavioral therapy that can lessen the symptoms and address some of the impairments associated with the condition, like limited language skills. But as researchers understand more, they hope to develop preventive measures or therapeutic drugs, or both, and perhaps ultimately find a cure.

As "It Takes Brains" works at reaching families to encourage donations, the consortium members are collaborating on standards for collecting and storing brain tissue. They're also establishing protocols for allocation of brains among the network's members as

well as collaboration in research and sharing of information.

Ms. Sadick is a writer in New York. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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