

# CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL CHILDREN

An important new project has been introduced within Cabrini to provide special support for children who have autism.

Research has shown that the healthcare needs of children who have autism spectrum disorders (ASD or autism) are substantial, and that these children have particular needs in hospital settings. Cabrini has long been aware of these needs, but the instigation of a special research project has provided a wealth of information that will guide how patients and their families can be better supported in the future.

The research project was led by Deakin University with collaboration from Monash University, Cabrini, the Royal Children's Hospital, and Amaze which is Victoria's peak body for people on the autism spectrum and their families. All shared the goal of identifying measures that could be introduced at Cabrini to provide an autism-friendly environment for children.

The study explored the views and needs of Cabrini staff who provide care to children who have ASD and their families, and parents of children who have ASD. Children who have ASD often experience heightened anxiety, and communication and social challenges, all of which need to be taken into account by staff in a hospital environment. The

TLC boxex; and Cabrini's Kelly Sherman and CEO TLC for Kids Tim Conolan



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difficulties of hospital visits highlighted challenges such as disruption of the child's routine, waiting times, dealing with unfamiliar people and strange surroundings. The 'busyness' of the hospital environment can be disrupting and upsetting for these children.

Many recommendations were included in the report including:

- enhancing communication among patients, families and staff
- early identification of ASD in children
- minimising anxiety and sensory triggers in children
- training and education of staff

As a result, several Autism Aware initiatives have been introduced in Cabrini's paediatric ward including:

- daily quiet time, with dimmed lighting, limited corridor traffic, and quiet activities

- bedside communication whiteboards
- a pre-admission clinic for all children who have ASD
- ensuring the patient's record is clearly marked
- review and update of communication materials

Further, new sensory toolboxes are being developed with the support of TLC for Kids. Research recommends that healthcare professionals use distraction and communication to guide children through certain procedures. The sensory toolboxes contain a variety of sensory items (including toys and books) that cater to a range of common sensory needs.

These initiatives will be introduced to all areas of Cabrini that are contact points for children, including the Alan, Ada and Eva Selwyn Emergency Department at Cabrini Malvern, Cabrini Medical Imaging and surgical theatres. There will be a major focus on staff training and education about all aspects of care and communication.

The future is looking brighter for children with ASD at Cabrini.