

TAKING CARE OF INDIVIDUALS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM IN PRE-HOSPITAL OR EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT SETTING

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The emergency department is the only place where anyone can receive care. That is why I love being an emergency physician. But I also see the gaps in our community as well as in my own training when caring for patients.

For me, these gaps came home with the multiple family members I have with children on the autism spectrum. They struggle when their loved one needs pre-hospital and emergency care.

To my chagrin, my training as an emergency physician included little if any understanding of the characteristics of those on the autism spectrum, the conditions that might bring them to the emergency department, or the challenges they face when seeking emergency medical care.

For these reasons, I began to research and disseminate how health professionals can better care for individuals on the autism spectrum. I became a consultant to ASERT and worked with experts in autism to prepare educational materials and train EMS professionals and emergency department staff on caring for individuals on the autism spectrum in these settings.

From this work, I would emphasize the following to those on the autism spectrum, their families, and caregivers, and my fellow health professionals:

- Autism's characteristics – especially difficulties with social interactions and communication – are particularly challenging in the pre-hospital and emergency department setting.
- ASERT has materials that can be used by those on the autism spectrum and their families/caregivers to communicate ahead of time with their local EMS agencies and emergency departments on their particular need for accommodations, how health professionals and the individual with autism can best communicate with each other, and the medical conditions that might cause the individual with autism to seek care.
- If you were purposefully trying to create an environment challenging for those on the autism spectrum, you could not do worse than how we deliver care in the pre-hospital setting or emergency department. Both are loud, with bright lights, and have multiple people doing many things simultaneously.
- When caring for individuals on the autism spectrum, minimizing stimulation and simultaneous actions, keeping questions simple and ideally Yes/No, engaging with patients and caregivers on how best to communicate the individual on the autism spectrum and conveying the same to all those involved with that person's care, and avoiding physical restraints that pull limbs away from the body (e.g., using a warm blanket to wrap a patient rather than pulling limbs away from the body with two- or four-point restraints) can be helpful in providing care.

Individuals on the autism spectrum deserve high quality care in the pre-hospital and emergency department setting. I am proud to play a small part in meeting this need for my family and our community and Commonwealth.

Note: Dr. Venkat also serves as the State Representative, 30th Legislative District, Pennsylvania House of Representatives. The views expressed here are in his role as an emergency physician and do not reflect any official position from his legislative office or that of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.