

No Don Burke, there is no link between autism and harassing behaviour

Written by Andrew Whitehouse, Winthrop Professor, Telethon Kids Institute, University of Western Australia

Allegations that Don Burke indecently assaulted and bullied staff during his time hosting Burke's Backyard were heinous enough. But in an [interview with A Current Affair last night](#), he created another victim: the autism community.

In the interview, Burke claimed that he has Asperger's syndrome:

I haven't been medically diagnosed but I've worked it out, what it is, and it's a terrible failing.

I have difficulty looking anyone in the eye. I can look in the lense, but I have real difficulty looking anyone in the eye ... it's a typical thing. And I miss all their body language and often the subtle signs that people give to you like, 'Back off, that's enough', I don't see that.

I suffer from a terrible problem with that, of not seeing ... and no-one can understand how you can't see it. But you don't.

In examining Burke's comments, it's helpful to separate "excuse" from "explanation". It's clear there is no excuse for humiliation, bullying and harassment. Nevertheless, reasonable explanations can still underlie inexcusable behaviour.

Burke sought to use Asperger's syndrome as that explanation. Whether or not Burke would meet criteria for Asperger's syndrome is not the issue. The problem is that the statements he made about Asperger's syndrome are utterly false and have an impact far beyond his own circumstance.

Remind me, what is Asperger's syndrome?

Asperger's syndrome is part of the autism spectrum, and is characterised by difficulties with social interaction and communication.

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Autism spectrum conditions are diagnosed by a team of clinical experts, often including a specially trained medical doctor, a psychologist and a speech pathologist. While autism is a heritable condition (it “runs” in families), we currently don’t know enough about the genetic factors underlying the condition and so we diagnose based on observable behaviours.

Read more: [The difficulties doctors face in diagnosing autism](#)

A defining characteristic of autism (and Asperger’s syndrome) is differences in social behaviours, such as difficulties initiating or maintaining social interaction with others. However, these social difficulties bear no relevance to a lack of empathy for others, which, of course, underlies bullying and harassing behaviour.

Empathy comes in two forms – cognitive empathy (ability to recognise others’ emotions), and emotional empathy (ability to feel others’ emotions once that emotion has been recognised). There is [strong research evidence](#) that some individuals with autism may have challenges with cognitive empathy, but no evidence for difficulties with emotional empathy.

In essence, once there is understanding of what a person is feeling, people on the autism spectrum are often intensely empathetic.

More likely to be bullied than a bully

While the behaviours that characterise autism can create challenges in day-to-day life, there is no link between autism and the perpetration of bullying and harassment. Indeed, dozens of [scientific studies](#) have investigated this, and all evidence indicates that people on the autism spectrum are far more likely to be the victims of these behaviours than the other way around.

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Read more: [Why children with autism often fall victim to bullies](#)

Burke's statements create real and lasting damage. There is considerable [research evidence](#) showing the stigma that still surrounds [autism](#), and the detrimental effects that stigma can have on [people with the condition](#) and their [families](#).

I think about the young man with Asperger's syndrome, who has fostered enormous courage to attend and enjoy school, and now has another target placed on his back.

I think about parents of newly diagnosed children, who are met with yet another jarring myth to swirl around their tired and worried minds. I think about how this may affect their view of the years that lie ahead of them. These years will come with great challenges, but also the greatest of joys.

I think about employers, who are just starting to understand the [vast talents and economic benefits](#) people on the autism spectrum bring to their workplace, and how even the smallest seeds of doubt can be fertilised by the public airing of patently false statements.

Read more: [Why employing autistic people makes good business sense](#)

I think about all of these people – the wonderful autism community – and how they would feel in being used as a punching bag yet again. The autism community frequently takes punches from

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media and public figures in an attempt to excuse or explain human behaviour.

Australia would do very well to not simply ignore Don Burke's comments, but instead use the anger they generate to continue the path of cherishing and valuing the diversity that the autism community provides our society.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/no-don-burke-there-is-no-link-between-autism-and-harassing-behaviour-88237>