

Naughty? Nasty? No – he’s my brother!



■ **TWIN BROTHER:** Martin's twin Enrico.

They were born just 10 minutes apart but their lives couldn't be more different. One went on to forge a successful career while his twin brother spent 22 years struggling to fit in before being diagnosed with autism. Now their family hope they can help others who are having to deal with the same condition.

There is much about autism and autism spectrum disorders – also known as ASD – that remains a mystery.

What causes the condition? Why are cases increasing? And how is it that children and families affected by such a widespread and severe medical crisis are having such a difficult time receiving proper care?

Last year former Boyzone and Coronation Street star Keith Duffy stepped-up his campaign in Ireland to raise awareness for the condition after his young daughter Mia was diagnosed with the disability.

Since then he has brought it to the forefront of the media with his tireless efforts to raise awareness of the condition and to raise funds for diagnostic, educational and support services for people with autism and their families. One of the main difficulties

SPECIAL REPORT BY ELAINE SHERIDAN

with the condition is that because people with autism do not look disabled, it can be hard to create awareness of the condition. And parents of autistic children often say that other people simply think their child is naughty; while adults find that they are misunderstood.

Problems associated with the condition include difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal language.

Many have a very literal understanding of language and take things up the wrong way.

That is where

the angst and frustration sets in. And some people with autism may not speak, or have fairly limited speech.

They will usually understand what other people say to them, but prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language or visual symbols.

People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism, although it appears to affect more men than women.

It is a lifelong condition – children with autism grow up

where

to become adults with autism. A spokesperson from the National Autistic Society in Britain said: "Currently it is estimated that 1 in 100 people have some form of autism."

"In Britain there is around half a million people. "We are constantly campaigning for those affected by autistic spectrum disorders."

"The National Autistic Society relies on funds from voluntary sources for the development of services for people with autism, their carers and their families."

"Campaigning is critical if people with autism and their families are to get a better deal from services and society at large."

According to figures from Irish Autism Action the condition occurs in one-in-166 births.

The Department of Health in Ireland has yet to compile figures so exact numbers do not exist.



■ **LOVING MUM:** Bernadette.

A long, hard battle for medical recognition

SURREY Irishman Martin Coppola is just one of the estimated half a million people diagnosed with autism in England alone.

His family count themselves lucky to have found sheltered accommodation for the 38-year-old – who was only diagnosed at the age of 22.

Martin, who is a twin, has spent the last 15 years living in Frank House – a residential home in where he is one of six adults getting assistance around the clock from a number of dedicated staff.

Now his family are trying to raise vital funds so that Martin can continue getting the care and attention he needs on a daily basis.

As part of their efforts a Spring Ball is to be held in March in aid of Hill Park Autistic Trust – the owners of Frank House, which is based in Erith in Kent.

The aim is to get further follow-on independent living accommodation for more people with the disability.

Martin's mum Bernadette – who hails from Co. Leitrim – explained how the family has coped with Martin's disability.

She said: "At the time of his diagnosis there wasn't a lot known about autism or any help to facilitate children with the condition."

"At 22 Martin was diagnosed very late in life – it was around the time the film Rain Man came on to our screens."

"Dustin Hoffman played a brilliant role as an autistic sufferer."

"The film highlighted the condition and brought it to the forefront of people's attention."

Bernadette remembers how difficult it was to have her son's condition recognised. She said: "At first everyone

thought Martin had schizophrenia because of his behaviour.

"That is the problem with something like autism – the sufferer looks normal to everyone and that can be deceiving."

"I remember getting pushed from pillar to post by doctors in the early days when I was trying to find out what was wrong with Martin."

"It was a hard slog back then."

"Thankfully we found out about Frank House and getting the placement there changed ours and Martin's lives."

Frank House is a six-bedroomed registered home and is staffed 24-hours a day, 365 days a year. It provides an outreach service aimed at people living in their own homes who need support in developing independent living and social skills.

Counselling, training and a social group are just some of the other invaluable services offered at the facility in Kent.

Aside from giving sufferers the chance to develop social skills and independent living, Frank House also gives the family of those sufferers important respite from the daily grind of caring for those affected by the disability.

Enrico Coppola is Martin's twin. For the last 20 years he has worked as a support officer for CIRIA – a research organisation in the construction industry.

He said things can be quite tough on the family when his brother is around.

But he feels that they are a normal family with four siblings having the usual family arguments that occur in every household.

He believes that he and his two sisters, along with their mum and dad, have pulled



■ **BROTHERS:** Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise in the film Rain Man.

together to get through the difficult times.

He said: "Because it was late in life when Martin was diagnosed it was sometimes tough for all of us."

"We worked through it together as a family though."

"The trouble with Martin is that he finds it hard to cope in crowds and when there are a lot of people around."

"Because sufferers find it hard to communicate with some people they often get frustrated and take it out in many different ways, quite often ending in arguments."

The brothers were born about 10 minutes apart – something Enrico feels may have contributed to Martin's condition.

He said: "I was told that maybe one of the reasons that I haven't got the condition is that I was born 10 minutes earlier than Martin."

"Because I got delivered first I got all the attention while Martin came later and the lack of oxygen to the brain may have affected him and left him with this mental disability."

"He visits us at home about once a month for Sunday dinner usually and then returns to Frank House where he receives care from the trained staff there."

"We are grateful for all the help they have given us and raising money for this worthy cause is something that we are happy to do."

"I will say one thing though – Martin got the good Celtic looks out of the two of us."

The Spring Ball takes place on Saturday, March 1 at The London Scottish Headquarters, Horseferry Road, Westminster, SW1.

Tickets are £85. For details phone 01322 334318 or email frankhouse@hillpark.co.uk



■ **MARTIN COPPOLA:** Diagnosed with autism at the age of 22.

Fact file...

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is part of the autism spectrum and is sometimes referred to as an autism spectrum disorder, or an ASD. The word spectrum is used because, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in very different ways. Some are able to live relatively everyday lives; others will require a lifetime of specialist support.

The three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are sometimes known as the 'triad of impairments'. They are: Difficulty with social communication; Difficulty with social interaction; Difficulty with social imagination.

What causes autism?

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated.

But research suggests that a combination of factors genetic and environmental may account for changes in brain development. Autism is not caused by a person's upbringing, their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

Is there a cure?

At present, there is no cure for autism. But there is a range of interventions methods of enabling learning and development which people may find to be helpful.

What is a diagnosis?

A diagnosis is the formal identification of autism, usually by a health professional such as a paediatrician or a psychiatrist. Having a diagnosis is helpful for two reasons: It helps people with autism (and their families) to understand why they may experience certain difficulties and what they

can do about them. It also allows people to access services and support. A local GP can refer someone suspected of having autism to a specialist who should then be able to make a diagnosis. Many people are diagnosed as children. Parents, carers and professionals who work with children such as teachers can all ask GPs for a referral.

Some professionals may refer to autism by a different name, such as autism or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), classic autism or Kanner autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) or high-functioning autism (HFA).

Where do I go next?

The Autism Helpline offers confidential information and advice on autism and related issues. Tel: 0845 070 4004 (open 10am-4pm, Monday-Friday) Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk