

Certain studies show alternative therapies may be risky, but some parents say treatments have helped their kids

By RADHA BASU  
SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

OFTEN, in the dead of night, six-year-old John would wake up squealing. During the day, the boy, who has autism, would be lethargic and surly.

Suspicious that his alternative therapy sessions were hurting rather than healing him, his mother, Mrs Sally Lim (names changed), put a stop to it.

"I saw no improvement in his condition, and there were rumblings on the Internet that it was not safe," says the 38-year-old project manager in a bank.

Three times a day for six months, she would rub a medicated ointment on John's body as part of a therapy known as "chelation".

Based upon the medically disputed theory that mercury in vaccines causes autism, the therapy uses drugs to "chelate" or bind with heavy metals in the blood, which are then purged from the body in urine.

It is just one of a bewildering array of more than 20 so-called alternative treatments pitched at anxious parents of autistic children in Singapore.

These range from the mundane - such as homeopathy and vitamin treatments - to the bizarre, including one that puts children in high-pressure oxygen chambers, and another that is supposed to map their brainwaves.

With mainstream medicine promising no cure, many parents wade through a sea of expensive therapies in the desperate hope of finding something to make their children well.

Most of the 15 parents interviewed said they had tried at least three or four different treatments, chalking up large bills in the process.

One parent spent \$28,000 hoping for a miracle that never happened.

Biomedical therapy, which involves vitamins, supplements and wheat- and milk-free diets, for example, can be continued for years, and costs around \$350 each month. Parents have been known to spend up to \$10,000 a year on the treatment, plus frequent blood, hair and urine tests.

Transdermal chelation - which Mrs Lim chose for John - requires an ointment to be massaged into the skin. Each tube of ointment costs \$100 to \$300. The function tests as often as once a month. Each test costs about \$270.

The trouble is that many of these treatments are clinically unproven and administered by people who are not medically trained. And the results are mixed.

In the United States, scientists have dubbed chelation a "voodoo" treatment. A government-funded trial to test DMSA, the chelation drug Mrs Lim used on John, has been suspended because it was deemed too dangerous.

The problem is that the drugs are known to remove essential minerals such as calcium and iron, and there have been reports of at least one botched-up chelation-related death in the US.

A recent study on rodents there showed that DMSA, while effective in overcoming lead poisoning, caused "lasting emotional and cognitive problems".

But such studies have been met with vociferous protests from parents and practitioners in Singapore, who claim chelation and other therapies have helped autistic children.

Therapists promoting the various treatments are known to publicise cases of spectacular success - often of their own children.

Seduced by such anecdotes, many parents drift from therapy to therapy, only to learn the hard way that the line between miracle and misery is thin.

Ms Jacqueline Ang, 38, who has two children with autism and runs an online support group for parents, says the devastation parents face at diagnosis is difficult for others to understand.

"How can you live with the fact that your child will never be cured? So we grab whatever little we get by way of hope," she says.

# Autism 'cures': Helpful or harmful?



Homeopathy practitioner Tejinder Kaur dispensing vials of medicine to a child with autism. The alternative treatments available to parents of autistic children in Singapore range from homeopathy and vitamin treatments to medically disputed therapies like chelation. DESMOND WEE/THE STRAITS TIMES

## What is autism?

ABOUT 400 children are diagnosed with autism in Singapore every year.

Autism is a brain disorder that typically affects a person's ability to communicate, form relationships and respond appropriately to the environment.

Some people with autism are able to function relatively well but others may

appear mentally disabled or mute or have serious language delays.

Autism makes some people seem closed off. Others seem locked into repetitive behaviour and rigid patterns of thinking.

Signs of autism appear as early as 18 months. Most children are diagnosed around the age of two or three.

Helplines include the Autism Resource Centre on 6323-3258 or [www.autism.org.sg](http://www.autism.org.sg), or the Autism Association on 6774-6649 or [www.autismlinks.org.sg](http://www.autismlinks.org.sg)

Autism definition adapted partly from the website of the National Institutes of Health, United States.

Her support group has about 560 parent members. "Easily 80 per cent have tried some form of alternative treatment," she says.

To help parents steer clear of dangerous, expensive and ineffective treatments, a 19-member committee of paediatricians and other health professionals is

now scrutinising overseas research on the efficacy of the various therapies.

MP Denise Phua, who has a 13-year-old son with autism and runs the Autism Resource Centre, sees the new Ministry of Health-supported initiative as timely.

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ed, there is an even greater need to regulate intrusive autism treatments such as chelation, which are being administered by practitioners who are not medically trained," she says.

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## LIGHT AT END OF TUNNEL?

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## RISK FACTOR

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She warns: "Parents should be aware that if not properly monitored, the child could end up being malnourished - this, in turn, may cause convulsions."

Housewife Melinda Chew (name changed) knows exactly how frightening this can be. In 2006, she rushed her son Jeremy, then two, to hospital after he convulsed with fits and foamed at the mouth.

Moments earlier, the housewife had fed her son some milk, which a nutritionist had banned from his diet as part of biomedical therapy to "treat" his autism.

The diet-and-supplement regime caused the boy to lose a lot of weight. "He used to love milk, so I thought I would ditch the diet and give him some milk since he had not been eating much for days," says Mrs Chew.

Doctors at the hospital were able to revive Jeremy. But her doubts lingered. "If I had not started the diet, this may not have happened at all."

She stopped the therapy. Jeremy is now back to drinking milk and has regained the weight he lost.

But as a mother, she says she cannot give up hope. Early last year, she put him on two other therapies - a form of Japanese energy healing and homeopathy.

This time, she says the results are "spectacular".

Little Jeremy talks more, can colour and look his mother in the eye.

"I am so happy," Mrs Chew says, a slow smile spreading across her face. "Things are finally looking up."

For now, at least. [radhab@sph.com.sg](mailto:radhab@sph.com.sg)

# Guidelines to make informed choices

IN AN effort to help parents of autistic children better negotiate the bewildering array of "alternative" therapies available here, a government-appointed committee has begun drafting guidelines to help parents make more informed choices.

It will warn parents and practitioners alike of treatment procedures that are not evidence-based or could be dangerous.

It will also evaluate costs and duration of treatment.

The 19-member committee appointed by the Health Ministry, which was formed in April, comprises paediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists and occupational and speech therapists who treat autistic children.

The panel members will scrutinise research on common autism therapies before drafting the guidelines, which will be

ready in the latter half of next year.

When asked whether the move was prompted by complaints, paediatrician Lim Sok Bee, who chairs the committee, said she and her colleagues were aware of "questions and doubts" raised by parents who have tried some of the therapies.

"We did not want to wait till something serious happened before seeking clarity on what works and what does not," said Dr Lim, who is clinical director of KK Women's and Children's Hospital's child development department that diagnoses autism.

While pleased with the guidelines, Member of Parliament and autism advocate Denise Phua, for one, would like to see the Government supervising these practitioners more closely, especially since some are not medically trained.

"Autism clinics or centres professing to treat people with autism should be registered under an expert panel," said Ms Phua, who heads the Autism Resource Centre and has an autistic child.

She feels practitioners should be licensed on condition that there is some evidence of the benefits.

Homeopath Tejinder Kaur, who has been treating autistic children for the past eight years, says she is willing to put herself to the test and get a licence.

"Chances of being misguided are less if a patient goes to a licensed practitioner," she said.

She added that she would be willing to show evidence of how beneficial her treatment is to an evaluation panel.

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