

AID

BY CHRISTINA BUCKRIDGE

FOR THE AUTISTIC



DR JOAN CURTIS is one person who can really appreciate and understand the problems of an autistic child.

She has an autistic child herself — Jonathan, 5.

English-born Dr Curtis, and her husband, Dr Humphrey Esser, live at Mansfield, about 130 miles from Melbourne.

She is particularly sensitive to the problems of an autistic child living in a country area.

The cause of autism is unknown but the basic characteristics are obvious.

The autistic child is solitary and aloof; he resists making personal relationships and is unable to communicate — although he is neither deaf nor dumb. He can become very attached to objects rather than people.

On overseas figures — there has been no survey on autism in Australia — she estimates there would be between 200 and 250 autistic children in Victoria — many of them in country areas.

"Country people with autistic children have to travel so far to get practical information about autism," she said.

But Dr Curtis believes she has found a solution to this problem — a travelling teacher.

This scheme has been operating for a year and the travelling teacher, Miss Gay Green, has been working with seven children.

She visits Mansfield, Eildon, Katamatite, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mooropna and Lockington and travels about 500 miles each month.

"I visit each family for 10 days on a rotating system, which means a visit once every three months," Miss Green explained.

"For when I am not there, I work out a program for the autistic child which can be continued by the whole family."

According to Dr Curtis, the family situation is extremely important to an autistic child.

"An autistic child needs to start being taught to make personal relationships about the age of two and a half," she explained.

"If they do not have training from an early age, their behavior becomes steadily worse until the family can no longer cope."

Travelling teacher

"Institutions are not the answer. These children need their families."

Dr Curtis says it is hoped a caravan will be bought for the travelling teacher.

This would be fitted out as a mobile teaching unit and could also incorporate accommodation for Miss Green. She now lives in borrowed caravans at the country centres she visits.

Miss Green, a qualified kindergarten teacher with experience in teaching slow learners, would like to do more study in autistic teaching.

She has visited autistic centres and has received information from members of the psychology department at Monash University.

Dr Curtis is also the instigator and organiser of the Mansfield Autis-

tic Play School, which is held for two weeks of the summer vacation at the local high school.

This had been operating now for three years and the whole family attends.

"The crux of the problem is for parents to get practical advice, and at the play school they can get this from experts and other parents," she said.

"This year we even had three families who came from Adelaide for the fortnight, which shows just how far people are prepared to travel to get advice."

"The autistic association in New Zealand sent observers to the first play school and now run one themselves."

Dr Curtis explained that the whole scheme was sponsored by the Apex Clubs of North-Eastern Victoria. Recently, the CWA of Victoria donated \$4000 to the scheme.

"The charitable public is well ahead of Government departments in seeing the need and helping to meet it," said Dr Curtis.

"The treatable nature of autism is only just beginning to be recognised. Formerly, autistic children were just left on the scrap heap."

The Mansfield Autistic Play School association has made two films on autism.

Dr Curtis has also written a booklet titled *The Autistic Infant at Home*.

The price is 50c, plus postage, and the booklet is available from The Southern Centre, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Hall, 582 Balcombe Rd., Black Rock, 3193.

MISS GAY GREEN (left) and **Dr Joan Curtis** — two people tackling the problem of autism.