Spain approves its first National Strategy for Autism

In November 2015, Spain took a step forward in the recognition of the rights of people with autism. As a result of a historic demand by the Spanish autism community, the Council of Ministers unanimously adopted the "Spanish Strategy for ASD", which will serve as the "reference framework for defining national, regional and local policies and actions concerning people with autism", according to the Spanish Ministry of Health.

For the implementation of this Strategy, the Ministry has set a time limit of one year to draft an action plan, which will include concrete measures and actions to meet the objectives, the agents involved in their implementation, the timeline for each action, the necessary resources for developing interventions and methods for assessment and evaluation by means of indicators.

According to the third sector organisations that helped to draft the text, the need for the Strategy stems largely from the increasing numbers of people who, in recent years, have been diagnosed with autism. In 1975, the rate of diagnosis in Spain was merely one in 5,000. Today the figure is one in every 100 people. As such, there are currently around 450,000 people with autism in Spain. In addition, it is hoped that a nationwide strategy will help bridge the disparities across the country’s regions, namely with regards to care and treatment.

The Spanish government recently adopted its first National Strategy for Autism, which aims to develop specific measures to improve quality of live, promote awareness and identify and respond to the needs of those living with autism. The document considers fifteen main strategic lines in terms of healthcare, education, employment and culture, among others.

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The strategy in a nutshell

The guidelines and goals outlined in the Strategy focus on favouring independence, autonomy, full participation and integration, equality of accessibility, and non-discrimination. These guidelines are essential for improving social inclusion, quality of life and the protection of the rights of people with autism. In this regard, the Strategy has been constructed around 15 lines, each with defined goals for guiding the development of concrete measures within a year’s time.

Cross-cutting strategic lines

Four of these lines have a cross-cutting character. They are devoted to:

• consciousness and awareness-raising, in order to boost the inclusion of people with autism and promote a positive image of their real capacities;
• accessibility, which aims to reduce difficulties in understanding the information;
• research, favouring the coordination of resources, development, innovation and transfer of knowledge;
• and training for professionals who work alongside people with autism throughout their lives.

Specific strategic lines

The remaining eleven strategic lines deal with:

• health, with a number of proposals that favour the early detection of autism, access to diagnosis and to specialised integrated interventions, as well as to advice and care starting from the moment of diagnosis;
• education, with goals to promote school inclusion and academic success for pupils with autism. This will focus particularly on specialisation, innovation and an adaptation of schooling methods throughout their lives;
• employment, with measures for fostering orientation and services for employment facilitating employment in both the private and public sectors;
• social inclusion, participation and independent life, favouring assistance integrated processes, specialised and multidisciplinary care, improving the associative network and autistic people’s access to community resources.

Drafting process

The first draft of this document was prepared jointly by the entities of the “Third Sector of Social Action”, representatives of persons with autism and their families, the Secretary of State for Social Services and Equality and the General Directorate of Policies concerning Support for Disabilities.

The first version of the document was sent to the ministries, regional administrations, the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces, the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities (FERMI, acronym in Spanish) and to the National Council of Disability, allowing each actor to make their own amendments. Numerous suggestions were then received and added, resulting in a great improvement on the first draft.

Throughout the drafting period, contacts were maintained with the main associations representing autistic people, welcoming and assessing remarks from their representatives, and seeking their agreement on the text to be adopted at the end of the process. These associations are: Confederación Autismo España (CAE), Confederación Española de Asociaciones de Padres y/o Tutores de Personas con Autismo (FESPAU) and the Federación Asperger España.
Reference framework

With the approval of this strategy, the Spanish government has established a reference framework recognising the need to establish minimum parameters to avoid territorial disparities, especially at the regional level.

The strategic lines followed by this document use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a reference point. In 2013, this convention led the Spanish government to approve the General Law for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion (Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November). Furthermore, the objectives of the strategy are in line with the health plans coordinated by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality.

Legislative measures for autism in Europe and abroad

Other European countries have also developed and implemented legislatures measures and specific strategies and action plans focusing on people with autism. This is, for example, the case in the United Kingdom, which has disposed of a legislative framework on autism since 2010 (Autism Act). This framework encourages the recognition of the needs of people with autism, namely in the area of adult life and healthcare, as well as the development of strategies for giving them answers (Think Autism. Fulfilling and Rewarding Lifes. The Strategy for adults with Autism in England). In April 2014, this strategy was updated, with 45 million pounds set aside for its effective development.

Several other countries have also developed strategies and action plans to raise awareness, promote identification and provide answers regarding the particular needs of people with autism during their lifetime, whilst at the same improving their quality of life and that of their families.

For more information, please see (ES): www.autismo.org.es

The main international actions developed concerning autism in the 21st century are the following:

- **2000**: Nebraska (US), *Autism Spectrum Disorders. Nebraska State Plan* (Updated in 2001);
- **2008**: New Zealand, *Autism Spectrum Disorders Guidelines*;
- **2008**: Denmark, *National Autism Plan*;
- **2008**: *The Autistic Spectrum Strategic Plan for Wales* (2018-2015);
- **2009**: England and Wales, *Autism Act*;
- **2009**: Victoria State (Australia), *Autism State Plan*;
- **2010**: Massachusetts (US), *Governor’s Special Commission Relative to Autism* (Legislative Commission);
- **2011**: Scotland, *Scottish Strategy for Autism*;
- **2011**: US, *Combating Autism Reauthorization Act of 2011*;
- **2013**: Peru, *Bill for the integral protection of persons with autism*;