

# A systematic review of healthcare professionals' knowledge, self-efficacy and attitudes towards working with autistic people



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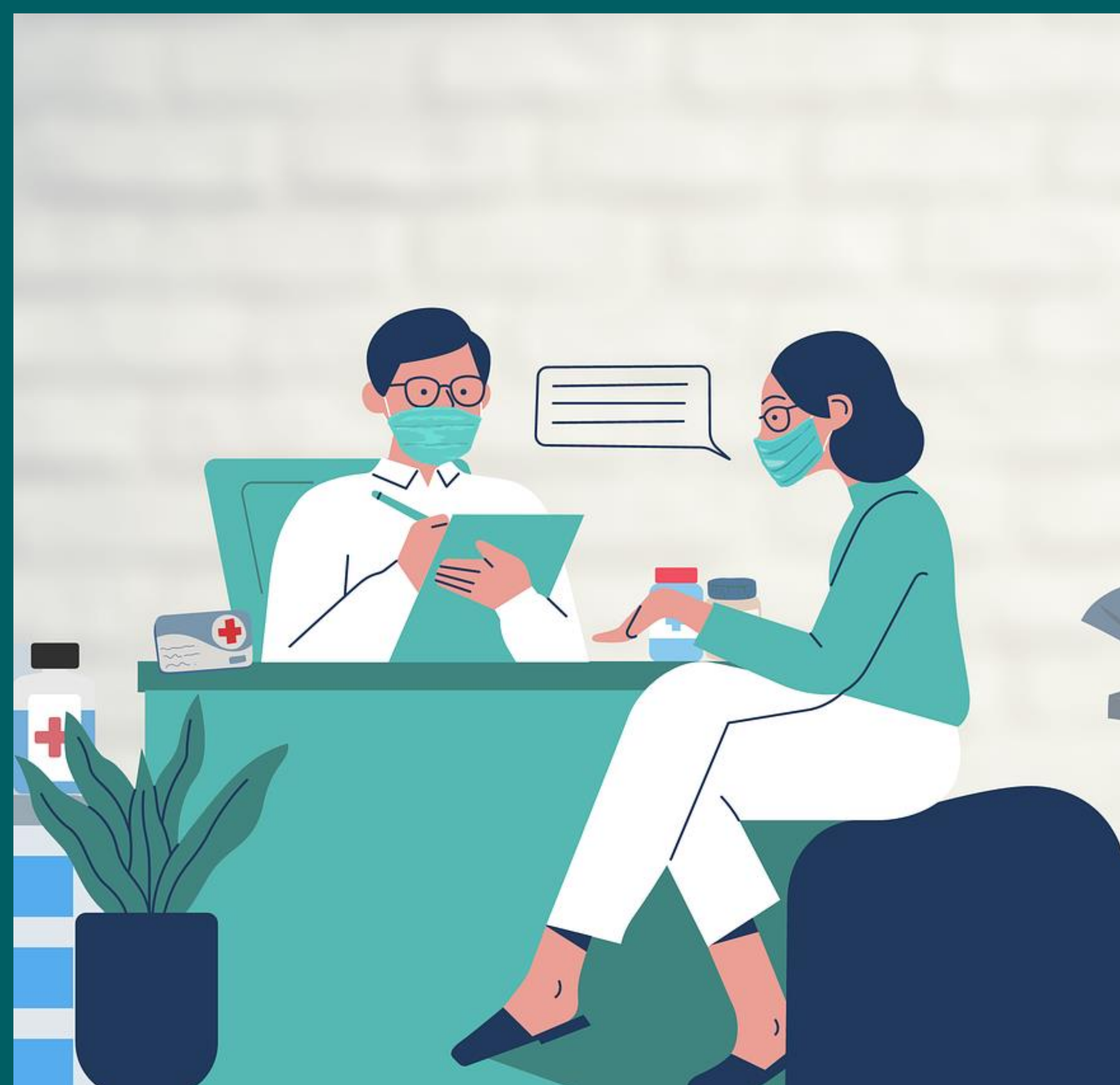


## Background

- Recognition, diagnosis and high quality support for mental and physical health relies on the knowledge, attitudes and confidence of healthcare professionals
- There is variability among healthcare professionals in different contexts, professions and cultures; other characteristics such as experience, gender and age may play a role
- There have been several studies examining healthcare professionals' experiences of working with autistic people, with differences in methods, measures and results but no systematic review bringing together this evidence
- This study thus aimed to systematically review the current evidence base on healthcare professionals' knowledge, self-efficacy and attitudes towards working with autistic people

## Methods

- We conducted a systematic review of the literature in November 2019
- The systematic review was conducted following PRISMA guidelines
- Inclusion criteria: quantitative methods; descriptive, cross-sectional or cohort design; sampled healthcare professionals (general practitioners, nurses, doctors, therapists, etc.); assessed knowledge of autism, self-efficacy (confidence) or attitudes related to working with autistic people; were published in English from 1994 to present
- We used the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale as our quality assessment tool (Boland et al., 2017)
- Narrative synthesis was used to interpret the studies, due to disparate methods and outcomes in the identified studies



## Findings

**Thirty-five** studies published between 2001 and 2019 were identified

Total **8,398** participants – sample sizes ranged from 19 to 1,396

The methodological quality of the included studies was rated as **moderately good**

**Specialities** (e.g. paediatrics) had **better knowledge** than general healthcare providers

Two studies looked at attitudes in terms of **comfort** working with autistic people, both noted discomfort

**Inconsistent findings** regarding the impact of characteristics such as gender, age or experience

Many different **occupations** included, most often: medical students (1656), occupational therapists (1536), nurses (1098), general practitioners (GPs; 891), unspecified doctors (421)

Many different **countries**, most often: US (9), the UK (6), Nigeria (6), Pakistan (3), Australia (2)

27 studies looked at **autism knowledge** using different measures; knowledge was rated **poor to fair** with large variation

Three studies looking at training found a **positive effect of training** on knowledge

Six studies looked at **self-efficacy**: moderate confidence reported, with more self-efficacy related to more knowledge and experience

Two studies looked at **beliefs**: one noted beliefs around curses & enemies causing autism. One found primary care providers attributed autism to 'cold, rejecting parents'

**Key message:** The evidence shows clear room for improvement to ensure healthcare professionals have accurate knowledge, greater self-efficacy and more positive attitudes towards working with autistic people.

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