

## Transcript – from interview

**John Esson - Pacific Autism Family Centre**  
**Tuesday, December 16, 2014, 06:42**  
**By CBC Early Edition**

**Stephen Quinn:** It is the culmination of six years worth of work. Today ground breaks at a new autism facility. The Pacific Autism Family Centre is a parent-led initiative to support families living with autism. It's a one-stop shop for autism resources and research, assessment, medical treatment and counselling. The main hub facility will be in Richmond, but eight other spokes, as they're called, or locations, will be built throughout the province. Now, John Esson is the president of the Autism Society of BC, and he's been good enough to join us in the studio.

Good morning to you. Thank you for being here.

**John Esson:** Good morning.

**Quinn:** When your son was diagnosed with autism, did you have any idea what that meant or where you could go?

**Esson:** No, I didn't. I didn't know anything about it. My personal experience.... Just before I talk about them, I do want to say.... In case I forget, I do want to express my kind of admiration and gratitude for a lot of really talented people who have worked with our family over the year. You just.... It's so great to see them working in a field like this and making that choice.

Thinking back to the beginning, really, you do have this feeling of frustration. Being a Canadian and lucky enough to be born and raised here and having personally been the recipient of some of our really excellent medical care, I think when you get over the initial shock, you kind of think, well, the system will be in place to help me with a challenge like this, and it was at least my experience it really wasn't so much at that time.

**Quinn:** How tough was it for you to find resources to help your family and your son?

**Esson:** Well, for me, back then, you know, really the best information and help and what I think moved us along came to me initially through word of mouth from the other families that had gone through it and were still going through it but ahead of me. That's a whole other story, but there's just this amazing network of parents on a personal level who are just so giving of their time and their hard-earned expertise. I can still recall the sort of long phone calls: well, what do I do now? You'd never know these people, with their own challenges and lives, had anything better than just keep talking to me till I thought I'd found my feet and had some direction forward.

Really, at that time, the direction forward for me, anyway, meant kind of getting things moving along by being fortunate enough to be able to take advantage of private options and take some of the reins yourself and kind of organize these programs out of your home, but the story you'd hear from people who weren't really in a position to do that or hadn't found their way to that at the time was, you know, you get in a situation where you start having a pretty good sense that something's wrong and you don't know what's wrong, and you finally.... You wait months to get in for your diagnosis, an official diagnosis,

and you're expecting, well, at least immediate help once I get that, and then it was kind of, well: "Here's your diagnosis. Good luck to you."

**Quinn:** Was that surprising to you? As you said, you had some contact with the health care system. It must have been quite a shock to realize that there were not very many resources there to help you.

**Esson:** It was. It was a real eye opener. Again, not to me, but some of the parents.... Again, it's another story but some parents who came before and some of the same ones I dealt with, they.... I'm sure they didn't imagine this was in their original life plan, but they from a feeling of necessity had really turned into activists in fighting for better assistance for families and intervention. That's a whole other story in itself.

A number of things, of course, have improved since then. That was longer ago than I recall sometimes. But that's why I do support.... We're very excited at the Autism Society about this centre and think it has the potential to really raise the level of support for families just to a whole new level.

**Quinn:** Autism is one of the fastest-growing diagnoses affecting young people today. Thirty years ago it was one in 2,500 children diagnosed with autism. Today it's one in 88 kids. Does BC have even close to adequate resources to help all of the parents and families who require help with autism?

**Esson:** We definitely could use more resources, without question. Again, there's a lot of good people out there trying to do good work. What excites me about this centre, which, you know, really has very big goals.... I urge people to take a look at their website, Pacificautismfamily.com<<http://pacificautismfamily.com/>>. You touched on some of the things they hope to tackle. I also note they have the stated goal of helping to provide truly lifetime support, from the really early, more timely diagnosis that I guess I kind of alluded to, which is just so necessary or helpful to effective intervention, to later support for adults and even seniors, which really has been somewhat overlooked today.

**Quinn:** We know much more today about the range, the spectrum, of autism, the range of abilities that kids have. How difficult is it to find a program that suits such a wide range of abilities? Can you plug a kid into any particular program?

**Esson:** No, and that's why you really need really well-trained professionals -- exactly. One of the things that, again, is exciting about the centre is.... There's a couple of things really excite us if I can just mention it. One of the things is, as you've mentioned, being a provincial society, we're really excited about the focus and the goal of the centre in providing provincewide support, and they do break ground today on this hub, physical centre in Richmond, but they have always.... The proponents have always had the goal of really doing everything possible to spread the benefit of their work throughout the province, the eight physical satellites they'll have and, of course, also taking advantage of really state-of-the-art information technology to help spread their work. That's quite exciting for us.

**Quinn:** What kinds of programs are going to be available at this facility?

**Esson:** Again, if one checks out the website, there will be resources. You know, a state-of-the-science, if I can call it that, library is proposed, resources to really maximize the sharing of the knowledge and the delivery of information to families but also more practical applications such as assessment and intervention and support and building capacity. It's a lot of those things that really excite the families. Of course, the centre, that physical centre itself, won't have the ability to treat everyone themselves, if you will, but I think the potential, with the resources they're bringing to bear on it, to attract even new talent

from outside the province but to help integrate the talent that's already here.... One of the things we find here is that there are a lot of really good and dedicated individual practitioners doing good work in their fields, but, if I can say so, at least our experience is the landscape is somewhat decentralized with not enough interplay or collaboration, perhaps, between the disciplines. I think this centre has the potential to really foster that.

**Quinn:** John, it's great to talk with you this morning. Congratulations to you and all the other families on getting this done.

**Esson:** Well, thank you. If I could just have one more just to congratulate.... The real drivers of the project are Wendy and Sergio Cocchia. They have just put an incredible amount of energy into getting us to here, and on behalf the society, really, we want to congratulate and thank them and say we look forward to seeing what more can be achieved.

**Quinn:** John Esson, great to see you. Thanks for coming in.

**Esson:** Thank you, and thank you for your interest, Stephen.