

An Interview with Dr. Chris McDougle

Dr. McDougle, please tell us about your area of expertise and why you chose to specialize in Psychiatry?

I knew I wanted to be a psychiatrist from the beginning. I was fortunate enough to train at Yale where my mentors would go on to be world leaders in psychiatry. At Yale, I had an interaction with a patient that altered the course of my career. He was 35-years-old and had profound social impairment, but if you gave him a date, he could tell you the day it fell on going back in time or into the future. I had never met anyone with autism in my life, but after that interaction, I thought *I want to do this forever*. I started the Adult Autism Program at Yale and was one of the only physicians working with that population at that time.



How long have you been at the Lurie Center?

I've been here for nearly 12 years now. I came to the Lurie Center as it was just starting up, and from the beginning, the Lurie Center believed in lifelong care. As a psychiatrist with expertise in treating adults with ASD, I was a good match for the job. At the start, 3% of our patients were adults; now it is nearly 50%.

What are you most proud of in those 12 years?

I am proud of the wonderful group of clinicians and staff we have assembled at the Lurie Center to provide compassionate, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary care to individuals with ASD and related neurodevelopmental disorders and their family members throughout their lives. We evaluate and provide care for individuals from most states in the United States and more than 25 countries, including those with the most complex clinical symptoms.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

I see primarily adults with ASD who have severe self-injury and aggression. The most rewarding part of working with this population is treating the severe self-injury and aggression that is taking them away from their life at home, school, or work. I'm not afraid of challenging and complicated cases. Mentorship is also important to me. One of the things I enjoy the most in my career is working with young people. I was fortunate to have had good mentors, and I try to carry that forward.

What breakthroughs do you hope to see in the future of ASD?

At the Lurie Center, we are involved in many ongoing research studies. For example, we are very interested in the interaction of the immune system and the nervous system during development. I am part of a team of investigators looking into the role of autoimmune disorders and how they might predispose an individual to having a child with autism.

What’s next for the Lurie Center?

We are excited to be developing a new program called “Aging Well With Autism.” Through this program we will focus on many mid- to later-life adults that we care for at the Lurie Center in order get a clearer picture of what life is like as adults with autism age. We are interested in many things: co-occurring medical and psychiatric conditions, living arrangement, vocational/educational/leisure activities, family and social network, guardianship, and financial planning/resources, and more. As we care for these individuals over time, we will learn about the challenges and opportunities that arise as adults with ASD age. This information will help ensure that we are prepared to address the needs of people with ASD in the latter years of life.

In the spare time you have what do you like to do?

I like to read biographies, particularly about musicians, because I’m interested in how an individual’s makeup and life experiences shape them into who they are. I grew up in Indiana, so I am also very passionate about Indiana University men’s basketball. I don’t miss a game and I go to many of them in person.

Who are your favorite musical artists or groups?

I like music that touches my heart, makes me cry, and makes me feel good. Some of the artists I like are Leon Russell, Cheap Trick, Tom Petty, and Steely Dan. I am more interested in them as people than as musicians. I also love the Beatles and all things John Lennon!

What is your favorite ice cream flavor?

My personal favorite is Baskin Robbins’ Peanut Butter and Chocolate.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Thank you to Dr. McDougle’s interviewer, Ms. Emily Stonestreet, a Lurie Center Summer Research Intern, class of 2023.

Dr. Christopher J. McDougle, M.D. is Director of the Lurie Center for Autism at Massachusetts General Hospital and the Nancy Lurie Marks Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. McDougle became the Director of the Lurie Center in 2011 and has been leading the Lurie Center ever since. He is an internationally recognized expert in the neurobiology and neuropsychopharmacology of childhood-onset neuropsychiatric disorders, including autism spectrum disorder, across the lifespan. Dr. McDougle has published nearly 500 scholarly papers in scientific journals and three books. He has maintained his clinical practice throughout his career and is referred to patients for evaluation and treatment from across the U.S. as well as internationally.