

World's Greatest Shave founder, autism leader honoured

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Dr James Morton laughs with two students of AEIOU Foundation's Nathan centre at Griffith University. Photo: Kaylene Biggs

When Andrew Morton was diagnosed with autism in 2001 his parents barely knew a thing about the disorder.

Fourteen years later Dr James and Louise Morton are two of the driving forces behind an organisation that's helped more than 1000 kids and their families better cope with the condition.

That's all after Dr Morton brought the original idea for the World's Greatest Shave to the Leukaemia Foundation after a successful grassroots effort in Lismore.

Andy's condition had an impact on the Morton's family unit, particularly younger brother Nicholas, now 13, and older sister Annabel, now 17.

That impact was one of the factors driving Dr Morton when he started the Autism and Early Intervention Outcomes Unit (AEIOU) Foundation in 2005.

"It was very hard, I admit. It's a day you remember," he said of the day he learnt his two-year-old boy had autism disorder, one of the more severe diagnoses on the spectrum.

"I remember going to the paediatrician and walking back with Louise afterwards. We didn't know what autism was.

"I'm a doctor, I'm a haematologist. When I was a medical student 10 or 15 years before autism wasn't something we even learnt about. It was a paragraph in the textbook."

When Andy was first diagnosed his treatment consisted of half an hour with an occupational therapist and an hour with a speech therapist every week.

The program AEIOU offers in nine centres in Queensland and one in Adelaide includes 20 hours a week of "intensive early intervention" with the option for up to 50 hours' childcare. There's also financial support for struggling families.

"You could do intensive programs at home but they would cost you about \$50 or \$60,000 a year and they were pretty invasive on home life," Dr Morton said.

"Many families around Australia still have to mortgage their family's futures in order to access these services.

"When we set up AEIOU it was really a model that could work for all children irrespective of their home circumstances and it would support those families irrespective of what their incomes were."

Dr Morton has been recognised for his work as a Member of the Order of Australia along with 18 other Queenslanders including Professor Sylvia Rodger, who won recognition for her work in occupational therapy and the autism spectrum disorder.

The Honourable Justice Roslyn Atkinson (distinguished service to the judiciary and to law reform), Christopher Madden (distinguished service to tertiary education), Professor Nancy Macdonald (distinguished service to tertiary education), and Adjunct Professor Daniel Wood (distinguished service to the mining and resource industry) were all recognised as Officers of the Order.

AEIOU costs roughly \$10 million a year to run, with a mix of state and federal funding and significant fundraising.

Dr Morton says a cost-benefit analysis showed an \$11.30 return to society for every \$1 put in.

He believes the program needs another \$6 million over four years to deal with two important issues - a lack of supply in the south-east corner, leading to a 100-strong waiting list, and the need for a better-targeted approach in rural Queensland.

He's calling on both major parties to make a commitment before the state goes to the polls on January 31.