Prof Francesca Happe
Kings College London

“Autism and Ageing”

Abstract: Autism doesn’t only affect children; children with autism grow up, and autistic adults grow old. There is a dearth of research with older adults on the autism spectrum; yet most people with autism are adults and, like the rest of the UK population, the proportion of adults over 65 is growing. We urgently need to know more about ageing with autism; are there special physical or mental health challenges that affect the elderly with autism? How do the defining social and communication difficulties, and rigid and repetitive traits, change with age? Social perception and processing, and specifically 'theory of mind' (ToM), has become a focus of interest in neurotypical ageing research. Most studies suggest a decline in ToM task performance in ordinary adults as they grow old. This raises interesting questions about ageing effects in autism - a condition typically characterised by impaired ToM. Will already poor ToM become even worse as adults with autism age? Or might life-long compensation efforts lead to preserved ToM performance in old age in autism? I will present relevant recent data, collected with Dr Esra Yarar in collaboration with Dr Rebecca Charlton, on mental health, quality of life and social cognition in younger and older adults with and without autism spectrum disorder.

All welcome to attend.