



We Make Therapy Fun!

Autism Innovators & Investors Roundtable

January 12, 2026 | 2:00 PM – 5:00 PM PST
1633 Old Bayshore Hwy #280, Burlingame, CA



Cathy Farmer
Autism Advocate / Investor



Uli K. Chettipally, MD, MPH
Founder, Sirica Therapeutics



Elizabeth Horn
Executive Director, 2m



Shay Cohen
Co-founder & CEO at Verballi



Conner Herman
Founder & CEO, Percy



Alexander Cherkasov
Founder & CEO, Autismify

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OVERVIEW



The Autism Innovators & Investors Roundtable, held on January 12, 2026, in Burlingame, CA and online via Zoom, brought together visionary leaders advancing autism care and innovation. Dr. Uli K. Chettipally opened the event with a deeply personal account of his journey as a parent of a non-speaking autistic daughter, highlighting the bio-psycho-social model and unveiling initiatives like Cognitive Sensory Motor Therapy with Robotics and AI-enhanced letter board communication. Cathy Farmer shared her lifelong advocacy shaped by family experiences, tracing the evolution of autism awareness and emphasizing the need for collaborative, inclusive, and data-driven solutions. Elizabeth Horn presented technology-enabled, patient-led innovations, including the H2O Coalition, the Resilience Score, and COUNTai, aimed at redefining autism care through longitudinal, multimodal data. Alexander Cherkasov introduced Autismify, an AI-powered platform designed to alleviate clinician burnout and optimize behavioral therapy delivery. Shahy Cohen showcased Verballi's AI-driven AAC solution, enabling rapid and natural communication for nonverbal children while unlocking data for therapy enhancement. Finally, Conner Herman of Percy addressed the critical impact of sleep on brain plasticity and autism outcomes, presenting a sensor-based, non-wearable AI solution to bridge gaps in current sleep care. Collectively, the presentations underscored the intersection of empathy, technology, and systemic innovation, offering a glimpse into the transformative future of autism interventions and investment opportunities.

Uli K. Chettipally, MD, MPH

Founder, Sirica Therapeutics

Personal Journey and Motivation

Uli K. Chettipally, MD, MPH, is a former emergency physician and medical researcher. He transitioned to innovation six years ago after early retirement from Kaiser. His daughter, Siri, diagnosed with autism at age three, inspired his focus on autism therapies. Uli has shared candidly about the challenges faced with non-speaking autism, aggressive behaviors, special schooling, and the limited post-graduation options available.

Keevin examined the current landscape, emerging trends, market gaps, and strategic opportunities within the autism technology sector and presented insights for start-up companies and organizations.

Key Insights on Autism and Innovation

Autism affects ~7 million individuals in the U.S. with few breakthrough therapies and unknown primary causes.



Advocates for the bio-psycho-social model:

- **Biology:** Genes, neurochemistry, physical vulnerabilities.
- **Psychology:** Behaviors, anxieties, and mental health.
- **Social:** Family support, education, and community resources.

Calls autism a “treasure trove for innovators” due to the large unmet needs.

Innovations and Initiatives

Cognitive Sensory Motor Therapy with Robotics

This initiative is inspired by two significant experiences: observing remarkable stroke rehabilitation results using a robotic exercise machine and witnessing his daughter’s transformation through

intensive exercise programs. The MVP developed combines robotic exercise equipment, virtual reality gaming, and AI-driven adaptive experiences. Early trials conducted with nine individuals demonstrated high engagement without any effects and rapid self-learning, even among non-speaking participants.

AI-Enhanced Letter Board Communication

The goal of this initiative is to modernize the letter board method for the 2 million non-speaking autistic individuals in the U.S. It involves a multi-phase approach that includes AI-generated lessons tailored to individual interests (such as neuroscience for his daughter); a dynamic digital letter board to replace multiple static boards; and an AI personal coach to reduce dependency on expensive human coaches. The ultimate aim is to enable communication, self-expression, and academic engagement for these individuals.

Vision and Next Steps

The vision for Sirica Therapeutics is to establish it as a hub for innovation in autism interventions. In the short term, the focus will be on setting up clinics in the Bay Area and collecting efficacy data to draw in investor support. Over the long term, the company plans to dedicate the next decade to developing scalable solutions that enhance daily life and promote independence for individuals with autism.

Dr Chettipally concluded with a touching story about his daughter's first Father's Day message, expressing gratitude with the words, "Thank you for not giving up on me."

Key Takeaways

- **Innovation Driven by Personal Experience:** Real-world family challenges can inspire impactful solutions.
- **Holistic Approach:** Integrating biology, psychology, and social dimensions is essential.
- **Technology + Empathy:** Robotics, AI, and personalized education can transform outcomes for non-speaking autistics.

Cathy Farmer

Autism Advocate / Investor

Introduction

Cathy Farmer, a seasoned entrepreneur and autism advocate, spoke about the evolution of autism awareness, current innovations, and future opportunities for investment and support. With over 20 years in technical and operational leadership and deep personal ties to the autism community, she offered a perspective blending personal experience and market insight.

Personal Journey / Motivation

Farmer's advocacy is rooted in her family history: she grew up with two brothers on the autism spectrum, including Michael, the first patient diagnosed with autism at the Cleveland Clinic in the 1960s. Her lived experience includes witnessing outdated and harmful treatments, from institutionalization and negative reinforcement to physical restraints. She has since dedicated herself to improving outcomes for autistic individuals, inspired by the profound joy and life lessons her brother brings.

Key Insights

Autism treatments have evolved significantly over time,



transitioning from harmful practices to strength-based and supportive approaches. This evolution reflects a broader understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity. The prevalence of autism diagnoses has surged dramatically, increasing from 1 in 10,000 in the 1960s to approximately 1 in 26 in California today. This rise in diagnoses underscores the growing awareness and recognition of autism within society. Additionally, over half of Gen Z self-identifies as neurodiverse, indicating a major societal and market shift towards embracing diverse neurological experiences. Despite these advancements, systemic barriers persist, including limited physician training—often just 15 minutes on neurodiverse care—high out-of-pocket costs, and decentralized healthcare solutions, which continue to pose significant challenges.

Furthermore, non-speaking individuals face heightened risks of abuse and underdiagnosis, emphasizing the urgent need for empathy and inclusive solutions to address their unique vulnerabilities.

Innovations and Initiatives

- **Medical Advances:** Research in neurobiology, genetics, and imaging is uncovering new insights into autism and comorbid conditions.
- **Emerging Therapies:** Trending treatments include oxytocin, CBD, GLP-1s, anti-inflammatory approaches, and vagus nerve stimulation.
- **Assistive Technology:** Improved availability of AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices and the potential of safe, equitable AI for personalized care.
- **Community Collaboration:** Farmer emphasized the importance of coordinated efforts, shared data models, and volunteer networks akin to “Doctors Without Borders” for autism.

Vision and Next Steps

Cathy Farmer envisions a future where medical training improves to equip physicians for neurodiverse care, ensuring that healthcare professionals are well-prepared to meet the unique

needs of neurodiverse individuals. In this future, personalized, early-intervention care becomes standard, significantly increasing life expectancy for neurodiverse individuals closer to neurotypical ranges. Additionally, Farmer foresees AI and data sharing playing a crucial role in accelerating research and innovations, all while maintaining ethical standards to protect patient privacy and rights. Finally, equitable access is a key aspect of this vision, ensuring that non-speaking individuals have access to AAC devices and that therapies are available to everyone, regardless of income, thereby promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities for all.

Key Takeaways

- Autism innovation requires a multi-dimensional approach, addressing medical, social, and systemic challenges.
- Investment opportunities are expanding as neurodiversity becomes a mainstream consideration.
- Collaboration, empathy, and a data-driven mindset are essential for closing the gap between research and practical solutions.
- Farmer’s message: supporting neurodiverse individuals is not only a moral imperative but also a societal and market opportunity.

Elizabeth Horn

Executive Director, 2m

Introduction

Elizabeth Horn, a health journey expert and Silicon Valley entrepreneur, delivered an inspiring presentation at the roundtable. She is the co-founder of multiple health-focused initiatives and a producer/director promoting patient-driven innovation in autism care. Her focus was on redefining autism through data-driven insights, patient-led research, and technology-enabled solutions.

Personal Journey / Motivation

Horn's motivation stems from her 30-year experience as a mother to a daughter with autism. Her daughter, now 30, has inspired Horn to pursue answers to the persistent questions of autism biology and behavior. Facing skepticism and limited institutional support, she became a relentless advocate, developing data collection systems, personalized learning environments, and self-prototyped solutions to improve her daughter's quality of life.



Key Insights

Autism is still poorly defined and often approached as a single, ambiguous diagnosis. Understanding the biology behind behaviors is essential to effective therapy and intervention. Daily, longitudinal data from sensors, wearables, and environmental monitoring can reveal patterns that conventional episodic clinical data cannot. Patient-led initiatives are critical, as families often pioneer the most meaningful innovations.

Innovations and Initiatives

- **H2O Coalition (Healthcare 2.0):** A technology-driven healthcare model starting with autism, emphasizing real-time data, prevention, and personalized care.

- **Resilience Score:** A proposed dynamic health metric integrating genomics, digital health data, and wearable sensor outputs to track adaptive capacity and progress over time.
- **COUNTai:** An agentic AI platform capable of predicting seizures weeks in advance using multimodal data, already in use with her daughter.
- **Autism Motor Signature (Move Group):** A research effort to define motor-based subtypes of autism, creating new therapy pathways beyond traditional behavioral interventions.
- **Fitness-Based Interventions:** Programs combining cardio and weight training to significantly reduce aggression, dysregulation, and improve overall health without medication.

Vision and Next Steps

Elizabeth Horn envisions a lifespan health platform beginning from preconception, where every child has a

personalized health profile and instructions for optimized care. She advocates for large-scale data sharing with de-identification for research; the integration of AI, sensors, and clinical data to advance prevention and early intervention; public-private collaborations to scale solutions quickly; and a shift in mindset: moving from reactive “sick care” to proactive, data-driven health

Key Takeaways

- Patient-led, technology-enabled solutions are reshaping how autism is understood and managed.
- Longitudinal, multimodal data is crucial to identify subtypes and track effective interventions.
- AI and real-time health metrics like the **Resilience Score** can transform care, prevent crises, and empower families.
- Collaboration across startups, government, and families is essential to accelerate progress.
- Horn’s ultimate goal is to redefine autism, remove life-limiting symptoms, and ensure every individual reaches their full potential.

Alexander Cherkasov

Founder & CEO, Autismify

Introduction

Alexander Cherkasov, founder of Autismify, introduced his company's mission to transform behavioral therapy operations. Autismify is building a care operations platform that leverages AI to empower therapists, reduce administrative burdens, and help them focus on providing compassionate, direct care.

Personal Journey / Motivation

Cherkasov brings over 15 years of experience in building and scaling digital products, with co-founders Dmitrii Geft, a medical doctor with healthcare marketing expertise, and Joe Santos, the founder of Portugal's largest autism-focused NGO. Their shared mission is to address the growing crisis in autism care caused by therapist shortages, burnout, and extensive administrative demands.

Key Insights

- Autism diagnoses are rising, but there is a global shortage of mental health professionals



- especially BCBA's in the U.S.
- Burnout and 100% turnover in some organizations highlight a severe care crisis, impacting thousands of families.
- Clinicians lose up to 80 hours per month to paperwork and admin tasks, leading to a 60/40 split between non-billable and billable hours.
- Delays in care result in missed developmental milestones for children.

Innovations and Initiatives

Autismify has developed an AI-powered platform designed to automate essential processes such as parent training preparation and content creation. This innovation allows clinicians to generate comprehensive, tailored parent

training plans in just 10 minutes, significantly reducing the previous time of 1–1.5 hours. The platform is comprehensive, supporting the entire parent training cycle, which includes design, delivery, family engagement, and outcome measurement. Early deployment of this platform has shown promising results, with a recovery of up to 20 hours per clinician per month and an increase of \$3,000 in revenue per therapist.

Vision and Next Steps

- Autismify aims to create “an Ironman suit for behavioral therapists,” offering smart, clinician- and client-centered tools that cover all clinical roles.
- The company seeks to scale from private practitioners to enterprise-grade platforms for large therapy providers.
- They are actively looking for visionary corporate partners, therapy providers, and academic institutions to validate and expand their solutions globally, with a focus on HIPAA-compliant U.S. operations.

Key Takeaways

- The autism care field faces a critical shortage of professionals and high burnout rates.
- AI tools can significantly reduce administrative burdens without replacing clinicians.
- Autismify has proven its ability to reclaim time and revenue for therapists while improving family engagement.
- Scaling this solution could transform behavioral therapy delivery and ensure families receive timely care.

Shay Cohen

Co-founder & CEO at Verballi

Introduction

Shahy (Shy) Cohen, co-founder and CEO of Verballi (VR), shared his insights on leveraging AI to help nonverbal children communicate in seconds. His presentation centered on the company's flagship AI-powered AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) solution, aimed at transforming the assistive technology landscape for children with special needs.

Personal Journey / Motivation

Cohen's motivation is deeply personal. His seven-year-old son, Matan, is nonverbal and charismatic, often referred to as "the mayor" of his school. Experiencing firsthand the limitations of current AAC devices, which are slow, complex, and highly dependent on caregiver support, drove Cohen to seek innovative solutions. His co-founder, also a parent of a child with special needs, brings decades of engineering experience and personal passion to the mission.



Key Insights

Current AAC Limitations: Legacy AAC devices are slow, clunky and heavily reliant on pre-programmed vocabulary, often failing in dynamic environments like schools.

- **Emotional Impact:** Families invest hope in these tools but are frequently disappointed by their inability to fully support natural communication.
- **Market Opportunity:** The global AAC market is valued at \$35 billion, yet has seen minimal innovation, creating a prime opportunity for disruption.

Innovations and Initiatives

Mato AI-Powered AAC App:

- Listens to ongoing conversations and suggests relevant words in seconds.

- Leverages contextual cues (time, location, events, personal preferences) to offer predictive and natural communication.
- Reduces the average time to build a sentence from 45 seconds to under six seconds.

Data-Driven Therapy Enhancement:

- Generates continuous 24/7 data that can be used by speech therapists for highly personalized therapy plans.
- Enables classrooms to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to individualized solutions for special needs students.

Partnerships and Traction:

Already working with three school districts (covering 130 schools), Cornell Tech for research studies, and a major reseller network.

Vision and Next Steps

Verbali's five-year plan begins with revolutionizing the AAC experience and then leveraging aggregated situational data to create transformative tools for families, therapists,

and educators. The company aims to reach 500 schools and 2,000 licenses within a year, driving approximately \$400,000 in annual revenue. They are raising \$500,000 to scale operations and expand market penetration.

Key Takeaways

- Verbali's AI-powered AAC solution focuses on enabling natural, fluid conversations for nonverbal children.
- Combining real-time context with personal preferences drastically improves usability and engagement.
- Continuous data collection opens new possibilities for therapy optimization and adaptive classroom learning.
- The AAC market is ripe for disruption, and Verbal positions itself as a leading innovator with proven early traction.
- Cohen's mission is rooted in lived experience, ensuring that innovation aligns with real family and child needs.

Conner Herman

Founder & CEO, Percy

Introduction

Conner Herman, CEO and founder of Percy, addressed the \$100 billion healthcare challenge of sleep problems, emphasizing their disproportionate impact on the autism community. She highlighted the limitations of current medical approaches to sleep, setting the stage for her solution.

Personal Journey

Herman shared her background as a mother of four, veteran, and board-certified behavior analyst with a decade of experience in behavioral sleep therapy. Her journey began with a successful one-on-one sleep consulting business for high-profile clients in Manhattan. After experiencing a grand mal seizure from overwork, she pivoted to scale her expertise through technology, founding Percy.

Key Insights

- 80% of autistic individuals face clinically significant sleep disorders.



- General practitioners have limited time to address complex sleep issues, often defaulting to pharmaceutical solutions.
- Sleep is directly linked to brain plasticity, which impacts learning and behavioral therapy outcomes.
- Existing sleep technology focuses on biometrics but misses environmental and behavioral context.

Innovation and Inventions

Percy is a non-wearable, AI-powered sleep monitoring device using nine environmental sensors (thermal imaging, LiDAR, light, sound, temperature, humidity, etc.) to:

- Detect movement, interactions, and episodic nighttime events.

- Correlate environmental factors like screen time or temperature with sleep disturbances.
- Provide actionable insights for behaviorists and clinicians without wearables or intrusive video.

Percy's AI can identify patterns like inconsistent routines, "bed rotting," and interruptions that typical sleep trackers fail to capture.

Next Steps

- Scale production from 2,500 pre-sold units toward larger manufacturing.
- Transition Percy from a Class 1 to Class 2 medical device to gain insurance coverage.
- Partner with ABA centers, sleep clinics, and potentially the Department of Defense.
- Expand to adult and dementia-related applications while generating a unique behavioral sleep dataset.
- Raise \$4 million to build the team and initial hardware scale-up, with a revenue goal of \$100M ARR by 2030.

Key Takeaways

- Sleep is a critical but underserved component in autism care.
- Current pharmaceuticals and consumer sleep tech are insufficient for neurodiverse needs.
- Percy innovates by combining environmental and behavioral insights to improve sleep outcomes.
- Early traction includes \$1.7 million in pre-sales and recognition as a Top 3 Sleep Tech solution by the National Sleep Foundation.
- The mission is to transform autism sleep care now and expand to broader healthcare applications.

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ABOUT SIRICA THERAPEUTICS

The inspiration behind Sirica Therapeutics is Dr. Uli K. Chettipally's personal experience raising his daughter Siri, who was diagnosed with autism. This life-changing event led him on a journey to find answers and help millions of individuals with similar challenges. The company was founded with the aim of creating a unique and engaging therapeutic device system that combines robotics, virtual reality, and video gaming to provide a personalized experience for people on the autism spectrum. Sirica Therapeutics' mission is to improve the lives affected by autism by offering a deeply immersive and task-oriented therapy that can bring joy and positive change to individuals and families touched by this condition.



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