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Autism spectrum disorder: Key challenges in Dubai, 2016

Background: Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Autism poses a particularly large public health challenge and an inspiring lifelong challenge for many families, it's a lifelong challenge of a different kind.

Purpose: To understand what are the key challenges and how to improve the lives of children who are affected with autism.

Method: In order to carry out this assessment we have used two approaches: (1) Qualitative methodology (focus groups with mental health experts) and (2) Quantitative methodology, prevalence or incidence estimates based on international research.

Findings: Autism is the most common of the pervasive developmental disorders. Dubai autism center estimates it affects 1 in 146 births (0.68%). If we apply these estimates to the total number of births in Dubai for 2014, it is predicted there would be approximately 199 children (of which 58 were Nationals and 141 were non-Nationals) suffering from autism at some stage. 16.4% of children (through their families) seek help for ASD assessment between the age group 6-18+. It is critical to understand and address factors for seeking late-stage diagnosis, as ASD can be diagnosed much earlier and how many of these later presenters are actually diagnosed with ASD. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a public health concern in Dubai. Families do not consult GPs for early diagnosis for a variety of reasons including cultural reasons.

Conclusion & Recommendations: Effective school health strategies is needed and implemented by nurses who are qualified and experienced in identifying children with ASD. There is an urgent need for bilingual (Arabic/English) health care professionals especially speech therapists and child psychiatrists to deal with the local population. There is a need for the DAC to identify and develop a closer link with neurologists specializing in autism, to work alongside and for referrals. Autism can be attributed to many factors, some of those are neurological. Currently when families need their child to see a neurologist, they have to go independently and search through the many that are available in Dubai and who are not necessarily specialists in autism. Training of GP's to aid early diagnosis of autism and increase awareness. Since not all GP's are trained to make such assessments increasing awareness about where to send families for a complete assessment and the necessary support. There is an urgent need for an adult autism center for when the children leave the safe environment of the school at 18 years. These individuals require a day center or suitable job training/placements where appropriate. There is need for further studies to cover the needs of people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Biography

Kadhim Alabady is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. He has completed his Doctorate degree in Public Health and Epidemiology, Master's degree in Clinical Epidemiology (MSc), Master's degree in Public Health (MPH), all from The Netherlands universities with broad experience driving research and development (R&D) strategies and operations. He has been registered as an Epidemiologist Grade A with The Netherlands Epidemiological Society. He has numerous publications in the UK in mental illnesses, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, dementia, autism, COPD, population health, road casualties and others.

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