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Short Communication

Challenges in Diagnosing Autism and the Rise of Neurodiversity Advocacy

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DESCRIPTION

The complex neurological disorder known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is typified by repetitive behaviours, limited interests, and difficulties with social communication. Over recent decades, awareness of autism has increased significantly, leading to more children and adults being diagnosed around the world. However, despite progress, there remain critical challenges in the diagnostic process, including delays, disparities, and misconceptions [1].

The diagnostic criteria for autism are outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), which defines ASD as a spectrum, recognizing the wide range of abilities and support needs among individuals. Diagnosis typically involves a comprehensive evaluation that includes developmental history, behavioral assessments, and often input from multiple professionals such as psychologists, pediatricians, speech therapists, and educators. Since early intervention has been demonstrated to significantly enhance communication, behaviour, and learning outcomes, early diagnosis is crucial [2].

One of the major concerns in autism diagnosis is the delay many individuals face before receiving a formal diagnosis. While signs of autism often appear before the age of three, many children are not diagnosed until they are four or older, and in some cases, well into adolescence or adulthood. This delay can be attributed to a variety of factors, including lack of access to specialized healthcare, limited awareness among parents or teachers, and the subtlety of symptoms in high-functioning individuals, particularly girls, who may mask their difficulties [3].

There are also significant disparities in diagnosis based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Research shows that children from minority backgrounds are less likely to be diagnosed with autism at an early age compared to their white peers. These disparities can be linked to systemic barriers such as limited access to care, cultural stigma, language differences, and implicit bias within the healthcare system. Addressing these inequities requires concerted efforts in community education, clinician training, and policy reform [4-5].

Another area of growing attention is the diagnosis of autism in adults. Many individuals reach adulthood without ever being assessed, often attributing their social or sensory difficulties to anxiety or other unrelated issues. Getting diagnosed with autism later in life can be empowering and transforming for some people, offering a foundation for comprehending experiences that last a lifetime. However, adult diagnosis presents its own challenges, as diagnostic tools are primarily designed for children, and clinicians may lack experience in evaluating autism in adults, particularly women and those with co-occurring conditions like ADHD [6].

Despite these challenges, the understanding and recognition of autism continue to evolve. Increasingly, the autistic community is playing a central role in shaping the conversation around diagnosis and support. Self-advocates emphasize the importance of neurodiversity, urging society to see autism not as a disease to be cured, but as a difference to be respected and accommodated. This shift has influenced both research and clinical practice, promoting strengths-based approaches and individualized support plans [7-8].

Improving autism diagnosis requires a multifaceted strategy. This includes expanding training for healthcare providers, ensuring access to early screening programs, promoting culturally sensitive practices, and investing in services across the lifespan. Equally important is listening to autistic voices to guide more inclusive and person-centered approaches [9-10].

CONCLUSION

Autism diagnosis is not just a clinical process-it is a crucial step toward understanding, acceptance, and support. As awareness grows and science advances, the goal must be not only to identify autism accurately and early, but also to foster a society where autistic individuals can thrive with dignity and belonging. This means creating systems that recognize individual differences, reduce diagnostic delays, and embrace neurodiversity as a natural part of human variation. It involves listening to autistic voices, respecting their lived experiences, and tailoring support to real needs. Ultimately, an inclusive future depends on both accurate diagnosis and compassionate societal response.

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