

Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Role of Family Medicine in Qatar

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Abstract

Review Article

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental condition that affects social and communication abilities. In Qatar, family physicians play a critical role in identifying and managing ASD, and they perform autism screening during child vaccination appointments that provide a key opportunity for early detection and intervention. However, there are various challenges, including the high volume of patients that may limit the time given for the assessment, as well as strong social stigma that creates a barrier to diagnosis. This paper explores the role of family physicians in autism care and the challenges faced, highlighting the importance of raising public awareness and taking a culturally sensitive approach.

Keywords: Autism, family medicine, Qatar, early detection, healthcare, stigma, vaccine clinic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder of growing concern worldwide, including in Qatar and the Middle East. Family physicians are in a pivotal position for the early diagnosis and management of the condition, given their role as the first contact health professionals. Developmental assessments during early years' vaccination clinic appointments play a critical role in autism screening, which is fortunately integrated into vaccine clinic appointments in Qatar. However, there are challenges related to the high volume of patients and prolonged documentation requirements that may limit the time given for the assessment. Additionally, people in the Middle East, including Qatar, may be reluctant to seek such diagnoses due to the stigma around it, which may affect the quality of information volunteered by the family during consultations. In this paper, we discuss the role of family physicians in the early diagnosis and management of autism and the challenges family physicians face during this process.

2. The Role of Family Medicine in Early Autism Detection

The role of family medicine physicians is vital in screening for autism during the developmental assessment conducted as part of the children's vaccine clinic. Autism screening is a mandatory part of the assessment at the 18-month and 4-year visits, used to identify early warning signs. However, the ability of physicians to conduct autism screenings could be

compromised by the high volume of patients and the many steps required in each visit, including documentation in the electronic medical record system.

In addition to time constraints during assessments, there is another social obstacle: parental resistance and social stigma around autism diagnoses. This issue was reported by many schoolteachers and specialists as a major obstacle for referral and autism assessment during autism awareness school campaigns, due to social stigma.

3. Cultural Barriers and Social Stigma

Cultural attitudes in Qatar and the wider Middle East may compromise early detection efforts for autism and other developmental disorders. The stigma around autism and other developmental disorders may delay parents in seeking medical advice, with some even resisting and refusing to accept the possibility that their child may have autism, even if presented with screening results. It is important for clinicians to use a culturally sensitive approach when presenting the results of screenings and to use appropriate communication strategies to encourage further evaluation.

During my participation in a school staff health campaign about autism, it became evident that one major concern from school staff when suspecting autism or developmental disorders is the parental resistance and refusal of further assessment due to social stigma.

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4. Managing Autism in Family Medicine: Ongoing Care

After the diagnosis of autism, the role of family physicians remains vital in managing overall health, including addressing associated comorbid conditions such as gastrointestinal issues and anxiety. Family physicians also provide a link to specialists and offer support for families.

5. Qatar's Healthcare Initiatives for Autism

Qatar has made significant progress in recognizing and addressing autism through its healthcare initiatives. The National Autism Plan aims to improve early diagnosis, intervention, and support services for children with autism. Family physicians are at the center of this plan, as they conduct the initial screenings and refer children to specialists when necessary.

On the other hand, Qatar's public health campaigns have focused on raising awareness of autism and promoting early detection. However, parental resistance, as highlighted in feedback from autism awareness campaigns, remains a significant barrier. Family physicians are in a vital position to help reduce this stigma by educating families and promoting early intervention.

6. CONCLUSION

Family physicians in Qatar have a crucial role in the early detection and management of Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, their ability to fulfil this role in detecting autism early is hindered by time constraints, high patient volumes, and parental resistance to diagnosis due to cultural stigma. While Qatar's healthcare system has made significant changes in addressing autism, including the integration of autism screening in routine vaccination clinics, there is still a

need for more resources and public awareness campaigns to support family physicians in their role. Authorities in Qatar must continue to focus on reducing stigma and promoting early intervention, making it easier for family physicians to provide timely and effective care for children with autism.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhanced Training for Family Physicians:** Family medicine training programs should include autism-specific education to ensure that family physicians can confidently identify early signs of autism.
- Addressing Time Constraints:** Consider restructuring clinics and workflows to reflect the amount of work needed during vaccine consultations by family physicians, allowing them more time for developmental assessments.
- Culturally Sensitive Public Health Campaigns:** Continued efforts to reduce stigma through public health campaigns are necessary to encourage parents to seek early diagnosis for their children.

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