



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Level of training in autistic spectrum disorders among hospital paediatricians[☆]



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Abstract

Background: Training in autistic spectrum disorders is crucial in order to achieve an early diagnosis. However, the number of papers describing this training is limited. This study describes the level of knowledge among paediatricians from tertiary care hospitals in different regions of Spain and detects areas that need improvement.

Material and method: A total of one hundred and fifty-seven (157) paediatricians working in tertiary healthcare hospitals located in three different regions in Spain consented to complete an online questionnaire divided in three sections (socio-demographic, knowledge about childhood autism, and opinion). Data were analysed using SPSS version 15.

Results: The total mean score of participating paediatricians in the questionnaire was 20.34 (± 2.43 SD) out of a total possible score of 23. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of paediatricians scored more or equal to the mean score. The knowledge gap was found to be higher with symptoms of repetitive behaviour patterns, concept of autism, and comorbidity, with no statistical significance. There were no differences in paediatrician scores within different socio-demographic groups. Just under two-thirds (64%) of paediatricians subscribed to the opinion that their own knowledge about autism is limited, and there is a significant lack of knowledge about facilities in every region.

Conclusions: There is a sufficient level of knowledge about autism among paediatricians in tertiary healthcare, although a lack of awareness about the management of these patients, with poor coordination between the different specialists that are involved in their treatment.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Trastorno autístico;
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Efforts should focus on achieving a better coordination between these specialists, and update the knowledge gaps identified.

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Nivel formativo sobre trastornos del espectro autista (TEA) entre los pediatras de atención hospitalaria

Resumen

Introducción: La formación en trastornos del espectro autista (TEA) por parte de los pediatras es esencial para su diagnóstico precoz. Sin embargo, son escasos los estudios que han cuantificado este conocimiento, por lo que el objetivo principal es determinar el nivel formativo sobre TEA entre pediatras de atención hospitalaria en diferentes comunidades e identificar aspectos a mejorar.

Material y métodos: Un total de 157 pediatras de atención hospitalaria de 3 comunidades autónomas completó el cuestionario online sobre TEA, estructurado en 3 partes (sociodemográfico, nivel formativo y opinión). Los datos fueron analizados con SPSS (versión 15).

Resultados: La media \pm desviación estándar de puntuaciones en el cuestionario fue $20,34 \pm 2,43$ (puntuación máxima posible: 23). Un 65% puntúa en todos los dominios igual o superior a la media. Los conceptos menos conocidos son: patrones restringidos de conducta, concepto general TEA y comorbilidades posibles. No hay diferencias estadísticamente significativas en cuanto a las puntuaciones entre diferentes grupos de pediatras según variables sociodemográficas. Un 64% de los pediatras opina que su conocimiento sobre TEA es limitado. Destaca un desconocimiento importante sobre la disponibilidad de recursos, presente en todas las comunidades estudiadas.

Conclusiones: Existe un adecuado nivel general de conocimientos sobre TEA entre los pediatras, pero un deficiente conocimiento en la parte práctica del manejo de estos pacientes y en la coordinación entre los diferentes equipos que participan en el cuidado de estos. Los esfuerzos deberían centrarse en lograr una buena comunicación entre estos equipos y en mantener actualizados los conocimientos sobre TEA a todos los niveles.

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are biologically-based disorders characterised by abnormalities in two domains: social communication/interaction and the presence of stereotypic and repetitive patterns of interest and behaviour.¹⁻³ They are usually diagnosed during childhood, so it is essential that paediatricians be knowledgeable of them.^{2,3}

In recent years, the concepts of autism and Asperger syndrome have been evolving towards what is currently considered a continuous clinical spectrum.^{1,4,5} These disorders are difficult to delimit into specific categories, which is consistent with emerging genetic models of ASD that propose the presence of polygenic interactions, polymorphisms, copy number variants and regulation by epigenetic factors. The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) published in May 2013 consolidated the term ASD; it replaced the DSM IV category of pervasive developmental disorders, excludes Rhett syndrome (which is currently considered a specific genetic disorder that happens to have a few overlapping symptoms) and does not differentiate between childhood disintegrative disorder and

pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (they are all comprehended in the term ASD).^{1,4,5}

The diagnosis of ASD is essentially clinical and based on the presence of persistent deficits in social communication and interaction and restrictive, repetitive and stereotypic patterns of behaviour, interest or activity, hyper/hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment.^{1,5} The symptoms must be present since early childhood, although they may be undetected until social demands exceed the restricted capabilities of the child. In addition, the most novel aspect introduced by the DSM V is a dimensional measure of severity based on levels of functioning that can be used to determine the position of the individual within the continuous spectrum.^{1,4,5}

The prevalence of this group of disorders has been increasing in recent years, and they are also frequently associated to other diseases and mental illnesses.^{2,6-9}

Although at present there is widespread awareness of the importance of early diagnosis^{1-3,7,9-13} and ASD is a frequent reason for seeking paediatric care both in primary care and hospital settings, paediatricians have different

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