CLINICAL ASSESSMENT OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER : FROM REALITY TO BEST PRACTICES

9th Conference of the International Test Commission (ITC), 2014

Bolduc, M., Poirier, N., & Abouzeid, N.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental pathology characterized by social communication deficits as well as repetitive, restricted and stereotyped behaviours and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

ASD affects nearly 1 % of the population and greatly alters the life quality of those who are directly or indirectly touched by it.

Here we investigate the clinical assessment process of ASD.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1) Provide an in-depth analysis of the clinical assessment process leading to the diagnosis of ASD in Quebec, Canada.
2) Compare the clinical assessment process to the recent guideline of best practices for the evaluation of ASD, as recommended by Quebec medical and psychological professional associations (Collège des médecins & Ordre des psychologues du Québec, 2012).

METHOD

Recruitment

Parents (N=41) of children with distinct degrees of ASD were sought via an ASD organisation - *Fédération Québécoise de l'Autisme*.

Instruments

- Self-reported questionnaire
- Semi-structured interview protocol

Participants

40 mothers and 1 father ;

Children's profile

- 34 boys and 7 girls ;
- 5 to 17 years old (M = 10.5) ;
- Severity : 15 kids show mild impairment, while 26 show severe impairment.

RESULTS

Child's birth

First signs of ASD are noticed before **24 months** for **72% of children,**

2 years old

First signs

Parents notice **first signs** of ASD:

- Language delay
- Restricted interests
- Poor socio-visual contact

4 years old

Specialist consultation

54 months between the first signs and diagnosis of ASD

On average, diagnosis of ASD occurs at **6 1/2 years old**

Severe ASD : 5,2 years old
Mild ASD : 7,7 years old

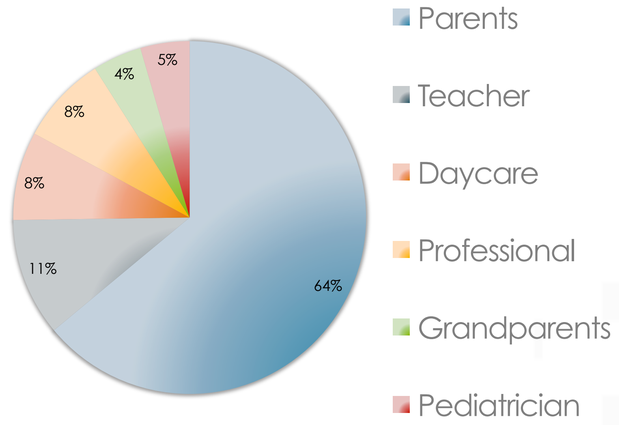
6 ½ years old

Diagnosis

A Multidisciplinary team assesses and diagnoses children

Autism represents the most prevalent diagnosis

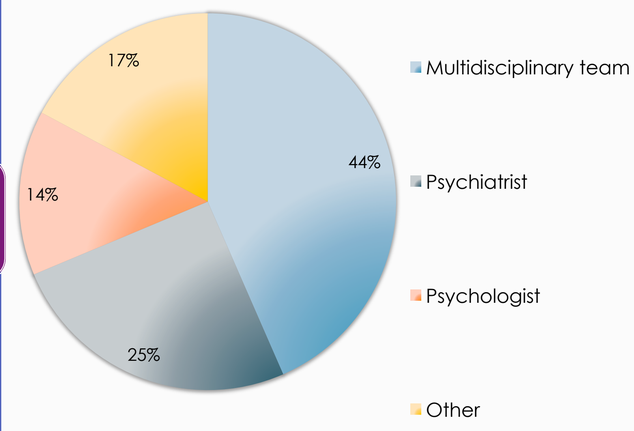
FIRST TO NOTICE SIGNS OF ASD



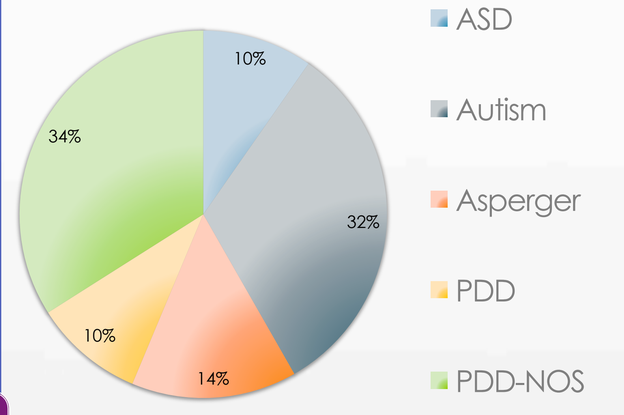
MOST PREVALENT SIGNS

Language delay	**39%**
Restricted interests and plays	**17%**
Poor visual contact	**14%**
Lack of social interactions	12%
Behaviour problems	12%
Fail to orient to name calling	10%
Global developmental delay	7%
Motor delay	7%
Eating difficulties	5%
Sensory modulation	5%
Stereotypies (flapping/ rocking)	2%

GIVING THE DIAGNOSIS



DIAGNOSIS



DISCUSSION

Our results show clear discrepancies between actual clinical assessments of ASD and best practices. Indeed, while guidelines stipulate that health professionals should undertake screening of ASD early signs – e.g., developmental delays in language production – our results show that parents are usually the first ones to notice the early signs. Our results also indicate that the delay to receive an ASD diagnosis – i.e. average of over 4 years from early signs detection – diverges from the recommended best practices. Finally, we show that, as recommended, the diagnosis is generally based on behavioural observations, interviews and standardised evaluations performed by a multidisciplinary team. In conclusion, in line with the promotion of best practices in the detection, diagnosis and intervention, it is critical to address parents' concerns sooner, which entails faster diagnosis and earlier interventions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research came to fruition thanks to the contributions and support of the *Fonds de recherche du Québec société et culture* (FRQSC) and of the *Réseau national d'expertise en troubles envahissants du développement* (RNETED).

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According to Best Practice Guidelines for Assessment

- Monitoring of development and behaviour should be part of pediatricians' check- up, aiming to insure early diagnosis.
- Parents' concerns are an important source of information as parents can be the first ones to observe early signs of ASD.
- In case of early signs, physicians or psychologists should initiate the assessment process.
- The diagnosis should be based on behavioural observations, interviews and standardised evaluations performed by a multidisciplinary team. (Collège des médecins & Ordre des psychologues du Québec, 2012)