

Factors affecting age at presentation of Autism Spectrum Disorders: A descriptive survey from a child mental health clinic at Lady Ridgeway Hospital

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Background

Early diagnosis of autism is important since Early Intensive Behavioural Interventions improves outcome. Age at presentation to child psychiatry services in Sri Lanka and the factors determining it have not been established. These would be useful in planning service provision. The objective of this study was to assess the patterns and factors affecting age at presentation of children with autism to a child mental health clinic at Lady Ridgeway Hospital.

Method

All patients diagnosed as having autism registered at a child mental health clinic at Lady Ridgeway Hospital from January to December 2013 were included. Data was collected retrospectively from clinic records.

Results

Half of the participants had presented at the age of 3 years or less. Speech delay was the commonest

presenting complaint (58.5%). Age at presentation showed a significant association with the nature of the presenting symptoms, with children who had speech delay presenting at an earlier age ($p=0.02$). There was no significant association between age at presentation and gender of the child, parental education level, income or whether the child was living with extended family.

Conclusion

Speech delay is the commonest reason for children with autism to be brought to health services, and it may prompt early presentation. Education about other symptoms may further help to ensure early presentation.

Key words: autism, speech delay, age at presentation