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SCREENING FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

An Update for Physicians

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Autism Spectrum Disorders are characterized by significant impairments in *social interactions* and *communication* and by the presence of *repetitive routines*. It is also common that individuals with autism have unusual sensory reactions, especially to tactile and auditory stimuli. Autistic individuals have cognitive abilities ranging from profoundly mentally impaired to genius IQs.

The recent increase in autism diagnoses indicates a prevalence of 3-6 per 1,000, two-thirds of whom are in the categories of Pervasive Developmental Disorders-Not Otherwise Specified or Asperger syndrome. At highest risk are the siblings of children already diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Although autism is a lifelong disorder for which there is presently no cure, significant progress is possible for children with autism through appropriate educational interventions which emphasize structured, systematic, and visually-based teaching methods.

Based on parents' concerns about their child's *failures of early development of language and social interactions* between 18-24 months of age, the following "red flags" which should prompt immediate, full evaluation include:

- No babbling or pointing or other gesture by 12 months
- No single words by 16 months; less than 50 words by 24 months
- No 2-word spontaneous (not echolalic) phrases by 24 months
- ANY loss of ANY language or social skills at ANY age

Several screening tests for early identification of possible autism have been developed, including the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), available free to pediatricians through the First Signs website (www.firstsigns.org). In order to catch those children whose autism appears after a regression between 18-24 months, administering the M-CHAT at the 24-month check-up is recommended for all children.

Complete diagnostic evaluation of autism spectrum disorders may be obtained locally at:

- Center for Autism & Related Disorders/KKI: 443-923-7680
- Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital: 410-578-8600
- Children's National Hospital, Washington DC: 202-745-3421
- Private psychologists:
 - Dr. Barbara Allgood-Hill--410-580-0750
 - Dr. Eve Band--410-902-0434
 - Dr. Karen Cruise--410-992-0262
 - Dr. Taruna Ahluvalia--301-565-0534

Suggested References:

Akshoomoff, N., et al., (2002). The neurobiological basis of autism from a developmental perspective. *Development & Psychopathology*, 14, 613-634.

Filipek, P., et al., (1999). The Screening and Diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 29, 439-483.

Fombonne, E., (2002). Epidemiological trends in rates of autism. *Molecular Psychiatry* 7, S4-S6.

Fombonne, E. & Chakrabarti, S., (2001). No evidence for a new variant of measles-mumps-rubella-induced autism. *Pediatrics*, 108.

Goldberg, W., et al, (2003). Language and other regression: assessment and timing. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 33, 607-616.

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Robins, D., et al., (2001). The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers: an initial study investigating the early detection of autism and pervasive developmental disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 131-144.

Websites:

www.bcc-asa.org

www.maryland-autism.org

www.autism-society.org