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Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Qatar: a national epidemiological survey

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Background: There are few epidemiological data on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in Arabic countries. In response to heightened public awareness and concerns about ASDs, we planned and conducted the first epidemiological survey of autism in Qatar.

Objectives: To generate a first estimate of the prevalence of ASD among children age 5 to 12 in Qatar, using a whole population-based approach.

Methods: We surveyed the population of children age 5 to 12 (N=146,745) residing in Qatar in 2015. Both Qatari citizens and children of immigrant families were included. Case ascertainment relied on two complementary approaches. First, eligible children attending one of 4 medical centers and of 4 special schools (private or public) providing diagnostic and treatment services for children with ASD were screened (Qatar Clinical an Centers (QCC)). Records of eligible children were abstracted and supplemented by parental interviews. Second, we performed a two-stage survey of children attending 93 regular schools (Qatar School Survey (QSS); N=62,011) with previously locally validated version of the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ). Of 9,074 participants, 8.5% (N=773) were screened positive and 91.5% (N=8,301) were negative. In the diagnostic confirmation phase, 165 screen positive children were evaluated and 14 screen positive (9.7%) and confirmed to have ASD; additionally, we evaluated 800 screen negative children of whom 3 (0.37%) were confirmed to have ASD. We used a combination of methods including developmental interviews, informant reports, record reviews and observations guided by the ADI-R and the ADOS-G, cognitive testing, and behavioral assessments in order to determine case status.

Results & Conclusions: This survey provides a first estimate for the national ASD prevalence in Qatar that is consistent with most recent International studies. The instruments and methods employed in this study should help designing comparable surveys in the region. Based on our survey, we estimate that 2,200 children age 5-12 have a form of ASD in Qatar. This estimate should inform the planification of health and educational services in Qatar for a population that is growing fast

Speaker Biography

Fouad Alshaban is a senior scientist at Qatar Biomedical Research Institute Neurological Disorder Research Center. Graduated from Baghdad College of Medicine, and became involved in the field of preventive medicine. He acquired his Ph.D. in preventive medicine from the United Kingdom. He held many different positions as a scientist working in academic research and as Associate professor in Occupational Medicine and Public Health. Prior to joining the Shafallah Medical Genetics Center in 2009, and the Qatar Biomedical Research Institute, he was Research Program Manager & Senior Research Coordinator at the Washington Hospital Center in association with Johns Hopkins University Hospital. Dr. Alshaban's research interest lies in the epidemiology of genetic diseases, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder. He is involved in two research projects funded by Qatar National Research Fund in collaboration with the University College of London, UK, were he investigates the genomics, anthropology and social impact of genetic knowledge in Qatar. Furthermore, he studies the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Qatar in collaboration with the Oregon Health & Science University and the Cleveland Clinic.

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