

## LETTER TO EDITOR

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Dear Editor,

### **Assessment of Knowledge about Childhood Autism among IERT/ SSA Teachers in the State of Andhra Pradesh, India**

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a spectrum of neurodevelopmental disorders occurring early in childhood, that is characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This condition begins at birth or within the first two-and-a-half years of life. The children affected are perfectly normal in appearance, but they spend their time engaging in puzzling and disturbing behaviours which are markedly different from those of other children (Autism Research Institute, n.d.). It has been observed that the prevalence of childhood autism and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is on the increase worldwide.

The general public is unaware of the severity of the disease and how to diagnose it. It is therefore important to assess the knowledge and perception of IERT (Inclusive Education Resource Teachers) and SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan-Universal Primary Education) teachers regarding autism. The Knowledge about Childhood Autism among Health Workers (KCAHW) Instrument was used to assess knowledge of autism among the participating teachers. The maximum possible score on the KCAHW questionnaire is 19 and the minimum score is 0. Esegbe et al (2015) consider a mean KCAHW score of 15 and above as good knowledge, and less than 15 as poor knowledge. The socio-demographic and KCAHW questionnaires were administered to 100 teachers. The completed questionnaires were returned at the point of administration and the data was analysed. The mean KCAHW score of the 100 participants was 12.62. The minimum total KCAHW score is 8 and maximum score is 17 out of 19. Only 22% of the participants were found to have good knowledge of autism (KCAHW score  $\geq 15$ ), while the majority or 78 % had poor knowledge.

As in the case of the western world, there has been an increase in the prevalence of autism in India over the years (Juneja and Sairam, 2018). Consequently, greater awareness is needed among the public, so that early diagnosis can lead to initiation of therapy sooner than later. However the low total mean score of 12.62 (out of a possible 19 on the KCAHW questionnaire) is a reflection of deficits in knowledge, education and awareness about childhood autism among the

teachers in the study group. Clearly the majority (78%) are not aware of the basic facts about autism.

Teachers play a vital role in interacting with children during the early years of life. Their ability to identify autistic children in the classroom will be beneficial in the long term. A study on effectiveness of early intervention, as evidenced by retention in mainstream schools, showed that 76.5 % of the children who completed the Early Intervention programme were integrated in regular schools, 2 - 7 years after having completed the programme (Karanth and Chandhok, 2013).

Screening is a key step to identify children at risk for ASD and to facilitate early behavioural and educational interventions to improve outcomes. The teachers who spend more time with young children are expected to provide care and adequate counselling to the families of these children. Unfortunately they do not know enough about autism. Education on childhood autism is therefore needed and can be provided through continuing medical education and by including detailed emphasis on childhood autism in the training curriculum. This will enhance early identification and diagnosis of childhood autism, leading to early interventions that are known to improve prognosis.

## REFERENCES

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