

Are primary care pediatricians ready to care for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD): challenges and tasks

Natalia Ustinova^{1, 2}, Marina Bebchuk^{1, 2}, Leyla Namazova-Baranova^{1, 3, 4}, Valery Albitskiy¹, Stella Sher¹, George Karkashadze¹, Elena Vishneva^{1, 3}

¹ Research Institute of Pediatrics and Children's Health in "Central Clinical Hospital of the Russian Academy of Sciences", Moscow, Russian Federation

² Research and Practical Center for the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents named after G.E. Sukhareva, Moscow, Russian Federation

³ Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, Moscow, Russian Federation

⁴ Belgorod National Research University, Belgorod, Russian Federation

Objective. Given the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (1–2%), all primary care pediatricians should be prepared to care for children with ASD and their families. However, children with ASD often have poor access to appropriate medical support all over the world, including the developed countries. In this paper we describe challenges and tasks in providing of primary health care for children with ASD in Russia.

Methods. Serie of foresight-sessions "Pediatric health care service for children with ASD" (4 sessions). During the sessions, working group was created, which included parents of children with ASD, pediatricians, psychiatrists, neurologists, gastroenterologists, immunologists, public health professionals. Working group compared Russian pediatric practice with guidelines for pediatrician's care for children with ASD from different countries (UK, USA, Australia, Israel) and analyzed evidence-based interventions.

Results. The main problems of the primary pediatric care for children with ASD were described.

1. Pediatricians are not competent enough in early identification of ASD.

2. Pediatricians are not involved widely in assessment for comorbidities as possible etiology (metabolic, endocrine diseases, epilepsy, genetic disorders and others). Consequently, can be delayed diagnosis of rare diseases (mitochondrial disorders, etc.).

3. Pediatricians are not familiar with specialty of medical comorbidities in patients with ASD such as gastrointestinal issues, nutrition status, food selectivity, allergy, pain or discomfort in children with ASD. The high comorbidity of gastrointestinal disorders in children with ASD (up to 84%), which can affect the behavior, is confirmed by many studies.

Meanwhile, the Russian clinical guideline for ASD care does not pay attention to this. Eating disorders ("food selectivity", "perverted appetite") are often regarded as psychopathological symptoms. At the same time, proper treatment of these abnormalities reduces the intensity of mental disorder.

4. Pediatricians are not aware how to conduct proper medical exam for children with behavioral problems. There is no special service to support child with ASD and family during medical procedures (blood sampling, ultrasound etc.).

5. There are no references between pediatricians and mental services.

6. Continuing stigma of mental disorders between pediatricians.

Conclusion. It is important to increase significantly pediatrician's activity in identification, evaluation and management for children with ASD. We conduct the initiative in the development of evidence-based guidelines for pediatricians to care children with ASD and families.