Early Identification of Autism in Nepal

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Abstract:

Early markers of autism are present within the first two years of life, making diagnoses possible by 24 months. However, children in Nepal are diagnosed at a later age, missing the opportunities for better developmental outcomes. There is an urgent need for a low-cost, easily accessible, early identification approach in Nepal. The current study implemented the Social Attention and Communication Surveillance (SACS) approach, to identify children between 11-30 months who are at "high likelihood" of autism in a local community in Nepal. Sixty Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) were trained to identify and monitor the early signs of autism using SACS and refer children who show these early signs. The FCHVs monitored 1926 children using the SACS, with 11 children (0.57%) referred for further assessments. Seven children attended these assessments, with three diagnosed with ASD (43%), and four diagnosed with global developmental delay (57%). The estimated prevalence of autism in the current study ranged between 0.16 % to 0.26%, consistent with previous studies in Nepal and other low- and middle-income countries. The findings provide evidence of the feasibility of community-based developmental monitoring of autism and other developmental delays by FCHVs, and this is a cost-effective and sustainable approach to raise awareness and promote early identification in Nepal. Further training of FCHV's and increased awareness of autism is needed in the community to raise the low referral rates and uptake of assessments. Regular supervision of FCHVs is also required to increase the accuracy of referral for autism using the SACS.