Alfred L. Siu, M.D., M.S.P.H
Chairperson
United States Preventive Services Task Force

Dear Dr. Siu:

Thank you for seeking comments regarding universal screening for Autism Spectrum Disorder before the age of three years. The scientist practitioner members of the Massachusetts Neuropsychological Society (MNS) endorse brief, cost effective universal screening for Autism Spectrum Disorders. Now that effective, evidence-based interventions are widely available, it is time to use universal screening to give all children who need treatment access to that treatment at the earliest age possible. As researchers we know that earlier intervention results in better outcomes (Fein et al 2013, Fernell et al 2013). As clinicians, we observe the pain that late diagnosis can create for a family, as they experience guilt or sadness that effective interventions were not provided as early as possible for best outcome.

MNS is a statewide non-profit professional association of doctoral-level clinical and research psychologists with advanced training and expertise in assessment and intervention for disorders of the nervous system (www.massneuropsychology.org). Neuropsychologists are experts on development and brain function who collaborate in creating and refining screening tools and interventions, and who can often provide training to medical caregivers when needed.

Autism Spectrum Disorders are lifelong disorders which have far reaching implications for families, including extended families and siblings, as well as schools, and eventually society in general. At one time, autism was considered difficult to treat and impossible to cure. Now, behavioral approaches to treatment and symptom-specific interventions immeasurably improve both the functional capacities for individuals with autism and the quality of life for affected individuals and their families. Research is providing evidence that intensive intervention results in reduction of symptoms to below clinical threshold levels for a meaningful subset of patients, and improve symptoms and quality of life significantly for others. (Fein et al., 2013, Troyb et al.,
Studies show significant improvement in language and communication abilities, along with notable improvement in social interactions, nonverbal processing, and daily living skills (Virués-Ortega, 2010, Parr 2010, Klintwall et al, 2012). Accurate diagnosis and treatment at earlier ages results in better outcomes (Fernell et al, 2013). Early intervention and monitoring allow for the introduction of interventions that may alter the brain pathways underlying cognitive and social function as well as provide services that reduce stress in the families of affected children (Wan and Schlaug 2010).

Universal screening is the most efficient and cost effective approach to intervention. As with PKU, lead poisoning, sports concussion management and other disorders, morbidity and costs of long term remediation can be minimized with early provision of services (Robins et al., 2013, Robins et al, 2001, Warren and Stone, 2011). Early signs of ASD can be subtle and easily missed without targeted inquiry through screening (Pierce et al, 2011). Screening tools such as (M-CHAT, MCHAT-F, and MCHAT R/F (Sunita and Bilszta 2013, Allison et al., 2008) require very little time (up to 10 minutes) and can be administered and interpreted by a pediatrician in a regular well child visit. The pediatrician can then refer those children with a positive screen for a comprehensive assessment that will fully delineate specific symptoms to guide treatment. USPSTF should endorse training and reimbursement for this inexpensive screening instrument, or a similar one, to help put children in need on a path to important interventions.

While diagnosis, or tentative diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is difficult for families with young children, early adaptation to effective child-rearing practices, treatment, and a range of community supports can greatly reduce the stigma and hopelessness that initial diagnosis can bring. MNS joins the American Academy of Pediatrics (Hassink, 2015, Plauche-Johnson et al., 2007) and Autism Speaks among clinical and advocacy organizations in urging universal screening.

Thank you for your consideration

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References


