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Pre-school child health assessments – what are they for?

Philip Wilson(1), Kirsten Lykke(2), Marit Hafting(3)

(1) Centre for Rural Health, University of Aberdeen, Inverness, Scotland, UK

(2) Research Unit for General Practice, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

(3) Uni Research, Bergen University, Bergen, Norway

Corresponding author: Professor Philip Wilson, University of Aberdeen, Centre for Rural Health, Inverness, UK. E-mail: p.wilson@abdn.ac.uk

Background & Aim: There is little international consensus on the provision of screening for developmental problems in preschool children, despite many countries dedicating substantial resources to such assessments. Developmental screening has been identified as one of the major gaps in European child health research.

The evidence for net benefit from routine child development assessments is weak but this largely reflects lack of evidence of effectiveness rather than evidence of lack of effectiveness. Consequently, services are forced to make difficult decisions regarding pre-school checks and families are offered preschool child health surveillance services ranging from a single post-neonatal preschool developmental assessment in Scotland to at least 14 scheduled assessments in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands. Not only the number and timing, but also the content of developmental screening assessments varies widely between health services.

Few preschool screening activities meet internationally recognised criteria for screening programmes, so what is the point of child health checks?

Method: Two presenters will propose and oppose the motion “Child development checks should only contain elements meeting international screening criteria” and the debate will then be opened to the audience. After brief summing up speeches, a vote will be taken. We shall focus on screening for developmental problems, on the properties of some screening instruments, on the effect of screening on therapeutic relationships between clinicians and families, and on the risks of over-medicalisation.

Results: Participants will learn about differing national approaches to child health assessment, and will understand the extent to which screening policies align to WHO screening criteria. They will also learn about the screening properties of a variety of instruments.

Conclusions: The science of assessing child development is in its infancy, and there is huge international variation in practice. An agenda for child development screening research is needed.