Why the diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder matters

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Abstract

Background:
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common and challenging childhood neurobehavioral disorders. ADHD is known to negatively impact children, their families and their community. About one third to one half of patients with ADHD will have persistent symptoms into adulthood. The prevalence in the United States is estimated at 5-11%, representing 6.4 million children nationwide. The variability in the prevalence of ADHD worldwide and within the US may be due to the wide range of factors that affect accurate assessment of children and youth. Because of these obstacles to assessment, ADHD is under-diagnosed, misdiagnosed and undertreated.

Objectives:
We examined factors associated with making and receiving the diagnosis of ADHD. We sought to review the consequences of a lack of diagnosis and treatment for ADHD on children’s and adolescent’s lives and how their families and the community may be involved in these consequences.

Methods:
We reviewed scientific articles looking for factors that impact the identification and diagnosis of ADHD and articles that demonstrate naturalistic outcomes of diagnosis and treatment.

Results:
Multiple factors have significant impact in the identification and diagnosis of ADHD including parents, healthcare providers, teachers and aspects of the environment. Only a few studies detailed the impact of not diagnosing ADHD, with unclear consequences independent of treatment. A more significant number of studies have examined the impact of untreated ADHD. The experience around receiving a diagnosis described by individuals with ADHD provides some additional insights.

Conclusion:
ADHD diagnosis is influenced by perceptions of many different members of a child’s community. A lack of clear understanding of ADHD and the importance of its diagnosis and treatment still exists among many members of the community including parents, teachers and healthcare providers. More basic and clinical research will improve methods of diagnosis and information dissemination. Even before further advancements in science, strong partnerships between clinicians and patients with ADHD may be the best way to reduce the negative impacts of this disorder.