Abstract

Purpose: Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can be missed during routine visits. A quality improvement project was designed to improve primary care provider compliance with routine screening for ASD using the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers-Revised (M-CHAT-R) during two well child checks.

Methods: The project design included two interventions. The first was an educational module with a pre/post-test examining baseline and newfound knowledge of M-CHAT-R screening amongst nursing staff at a small urban primary care organization. The second was a best practice alert in the electronic medical record to alert nursing staff during the rooming process to screen eligible patients for ASD. Results that were above the cutoff threshold were automatically flagged for the provider to review.

Results: For the first intervention, the mean difference in pre/post-test scores was an improvement of 19 percentage points (SD 16.5). For the second intervention, overall, there was a one percentage point increase in the percentage of patients who were screened in quarter 4 (47%) as compared to quarter 3 (46%). However, some racial disparities improved. While the percentage of Caucasian patients who were screened did not change, the percentage of African American patients who were screened increased from 27% in quarter 3 to 33% in quarter 4. The ethnic disparity – between Hispanic and non-Hispanic patients – also improved.

Conclusions: While the overall percentage of patients who received an ASD screening did not change, this project demonstrates that standardized work flows may reduce disparities in which patients receive an ASD screening. Familiarizing nursing staff with the evidence on and reasoning behind screening using a brief educational module allowed them to be more knowledgeable on the organization's screening procedures.

Implications: This project targeted one barrier to ASD screening. Future projects should aim to target other barriers, such as improving access to care for minority patient populations.

Keywords: Autism, screening, well child check, M-CHAT-R, electronic medical record