

## Population-based screening for autism spectrum disorders

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The BMJ of 29 October 2011 contains three items about autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and two of them have considerable scope for causing confusion about the case for population-based screening for ASD. First, the editorial on NICE Clinical Guideline 128 states that NICE regards screening tools as a useful adjunct to gathering information about autism related behaviours.(1,2) The NICE guidance relates to children with suspected ASD and specifically excludes consideration of applying screening tools to whole populations. Without any acknowledgment of that fact, the next sentence of the editorial refers to a debate about routine population-based screening for autism.

Second, Blenner et al discuss policies on population-based screening for ASD under the heading 'How should non-specialists assess children with suspected autism?' (3) This is inappropriate, because population-based screening is irrelevant to children with suspected autism. Children with suspected autism need careful consideration of possible referral and diagnosis by whoever has raised the suspicion of autism. They do not need population-based screening for ASD, which stands or falls on whether it benefits children without suspected autism.

Autism is common, and can significantly affect a child and their family. There is therefore considerable appetite to develop screening for all children to detect possible early autism so they might be treated sooner. However this is not the purpose of the NICE guidance, nor is it in their scope. Population screening for ASD is currently being considered by the UK National Screening Committee. A report for consultation is available at [www.screening.nhs.uk/autism](http://www.screening.nhs.uk/autism) and comments can be submitted until 16 January 2012. Meanwhile, careless application to whole populations of material that deals with screening in children with suspected disease should be avoided.

1. Zwaigenbaum L. Assessment and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. BMJ 2011;343:d6628 (29 October).
2. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. Autism: recognition, referral and diagnosis of children and young people on the autism spectrum. (Clinical guideline 128.) 2011. <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG128>.
3. Blenner S, Reddy A, Augustyn M. Diagnosis and management of autism in childhood. BMJ 2011;343:d6238 (29 October).

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