Sustainability of an early detection program for autism spectrum disorder over the course of 8 years

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The importance of detecting autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as early as possible, followed by implementing early interventions as soon as possible, is increasingly being recognized. The aim of the current study was to evaluate the long-term effects of a program for the early detection of ASD. The program involved (1) training primary care providers (e.g. doctors of well-baby clinics) to recognize the early signs of ASD, (2) the use of a referral protocol and a screening instrument (so primary care providers have clear instructions about how and who to refer young children suspected of having ASD to), and (3) the formation of a multidisciplinary team (comprising a range of relevant professionals). Our research involved looking at the age at referral of children aged 0 to 6 years across three periods in time: before, during and after the program. In total, we looked at this information for 513 children subsequently diagnosed with ASD and 722 children subsequently diagnosed with another (non-ASD) condition. We wanted to see whether there were any long-term effects; finding out whether a reduction in the age at which children with ASD were referred was sustained, even after the program ended. Our results indicated that although the program led to earlier referral of children with ASD (after accounting for other non-ASD referrals), the effect was not sustained after the program ended. This study highlights the importance of continued investment in the early detection of ASD.