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AGE DETERMINATION IN REFUGEE CHILDREN: DEVELOPING AN EVIDENCE-BASED NARRATIVE HISTORY TOOL

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Abstract Text:

Background and Aim:

Age uncertainty is an increasingly common issue facing healthcare professionals when interacting with refugee children, who regularly arrive with incorrect or no age documentation. Incorrectly documented age impacts on education, socialisation and medical care¹ and there is ongoing research into age assessment methods, with guidelines promoting holistic age assessments, including interviews, over purely biomedical approaches.²

This study aimed to develop the first evidence-based narrative history tool for age assessment of refugee children with age uncertainty by exploring cultural narratives of age.

Method:

Qualitative study comprising 7 small group, semi-structured interviews with 24 humanitarian entrants (10 male, 14 female) recruited from Afghan, Bhutanese and Burundian communities in Adelaide, Australia. Interviews were conducted with interpreters, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

Results:

5 themes emerged: the significance of age; ways of remembering age; the refugee experience and its effect on age recall; the reliability and permissibility of documentation, and the impact of erroneous age in Australia.

Participants reported age was significant, but understood and remembered differently. Level of functioning was more relevant than knowledge of exact chronological age. Age was remembered in relation to events and other people, and embedded in narrative accounts. Birth was often not registered, with birth and age-containing documentation obtained later in life. These documents commonly reflected cultural ideas regarding age, rather than recording true chronological age. The refugee experience profoundly affected the accurate recall of age.

These findings supported the use of narrative history interviews in age assessment and the structure and content of the Age Assessment Tool Questionnaire.

Conclusion

Narrative history provides valuable information regarding age in refugee children with age uncertainty, facilitating the location of age within a range that approximates true chronological age in the absence of reliable age documentation. The Age Assessment Tool Questionnaire provides health professionals with an evidence-based framework for conducting age assessment interviews.

References

1. Benson J, et al., 2008, *Aust Fam Physician*, 37(10):821-5
2. Aynsley-Green A, et al., 2012, *Br Med Bull*, 102:17-42

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