Autism Spectrum Disorder

An emerging public health issue
Your role and context

- You are a community paediatrician working in outreach clinic through an Aboriginal preschool and Aboriginal Medical Service in a semi-rural area.

- The clinic funding is time limited. And its purpose was to circumvent the long waiting list for mainstream developmental assessment services in the area with waiting times well over 6-9 months.

- An Early Links worker (from an NGO) is there to support families with the referral follow up process.

- The community allied health team provide developmental screening through preschool visits; and they provide support for the preschool educators.
Emerging concerns

Soon after you start the clinic you note a number of issues:

1. The families of the children who are referred to you seem largely unaware of concerns about their child’s development and or behaviour.

2. Many of these children are already in the process of transitioning to school.

3. You also see children already in school, primary and early high school, some with multiple other diagnosis who fit the criteria for ASD.

4. There is rising concern from all quarters about this unexpectedly high rate of ASD diagnosis in this cohort.
The question put to you

- The centre manager asks your opinion on how these children and families can be best supported.

- This gets you thinking about why* it is especially important that these children, are appropriately diagnosed and managed in a timely manner.
What is ASD

- DSM 5 criteria
- Disability - context dependent (relative to the environment)
- Variably referred to as a neurocognitive/neurodevelopmental/neuropsychiatric disorder
- Raises the question of whether specific symptomatology that persist or worsen over time are overlapping symptoms of comorbid conditions or part of the ASD symptom cluster.
- No clear aetiology
The significance of comorbid dx

- Some of these overlapping symptoms can have dire consequences.

- You start thinking about the trajectory of an Aboriginal youth with a diagnosis of ADHD, ODD… and maybe CD.

- You start considering this in the context of intergenerational cycles of trauma, underlying risk factors for behavioural disorders and mental illness, and about the social determinants of health.
Why is the appropriate and timely diagnosis & management of ASD especially important for Indigenous Australian families?

- We know that Indigenous Australians experience a disparity in health outcomes and disadvantage (equity gap).

- This is reflected in the notably higher rates of risk factors/outcome indicators for behavioural disorders.

- A significant level of the background complex mental health issues and drug and alcohol related issues are attributable to the ongoing ramifications of colonisation and disenfranchisement. (Intergenerational trauma).
Your Task

- Consider assessment of ASD from a population perspective, particularly in context of social disadvantage & intergenerational trauma
  - so that an informed and comprehensive public health response can be formulated to address the increasing prevalence of ASD

- Feel free to think outside the box

- The solutions could focus on any one or all of the issues from aetiology, estimating prevalence to management.

- Suggest changes to current services or suggest novel alternate models of service.
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model

COMMUNITY
- Safe neighbourhood
- Safe at school
- Good family interactions
- 'Things that frighten my child are ...'

FAMILY
- House is safe
- Family's health
- Healthy eating
- Can get to health appointments

CHILD
- Feels safe at home
- Enjoys learning
- Age-appropriate development
- 'Things that make my child happy are ...'

PHYSICAL HEALTH
- Sense of safety
- Physical health
- Mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Sense of belonging and identity, including cultural identity

MENTAL HEALTH & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
- Support from friends and community
- Mental health of family members
- Parent/child relationship
- Support from family

RELATIONSHIPS
- Friends and neighbours are known and helpful
- Family spends time together
- Family closeness and support
- Connection to community and culture

MATERIAL WELLBEING
- Access to local services
- Access to transport
- Enough space at home
- Access to adequate food and clothes
- Is working or looking for work

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
- Sport or outdoor play
- Activities, clubs and groups
- Goes to pre-school/school
- My child is good at ...