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Knowledge of autism and utilization of healthcare services among Somali and Eritrean immigrants in Norway and their counterparts in Somalia

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Background: Autism is a major public health problem among immigrants, with immigrants from Somalia and Eritrea having one of the highest prevalence of autism in Norway. This study explored Somali and Eritrean parents' knowledge of autism, and their experiences with stigma and discrimination, and we compared them with their counterparts in Somalia.

Methods: An in-depth interview was used to collect data from 15 Somali and Eritrean parents of children with autism in Norway and 2 parents of children with autism who lived in the two largest cities in Somalia. We used a pilot-tested semi-structured interview-guide. A mixed of purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants who 1) identified as an Eritrean or Somali immigrant, 2) identified as a parent of a child with autism, and 3) were 18 years and older. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated, and cleaned for errors. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using Nvivo12 software. Results: The findings showed that Somali and Eritrean parents had relatively good knowledge of the risk factors for and treatment of autism. Some parents had feeling that the MMR vaccine was behind the autism of their children. Similarly, five of the parents reported that bone marrow from camels can help alleviate the symptoms of autism. Widespread stigma, judgment and blaming of parents and children with autism were reported. This was attributed to a lack of knowledge about autism among Somali and Eritrean communities in Norway. Immigrants were largely satisfy with services provided to their children while non-immigrants reported lack of healthcare and health information. Conclusion: Community-based initiatives that engage key stakeholders including civil society organizations, can help to address misconceptions about autism. Furthermore, national and community-owned mass media should produce programs in which individuals with ASD and their families share their experiences and struggles and health professionals provide accurate information about the disorder while promoting inclusion and acceptance.

Biography

Abdi Gele has PhD in public health and epidemiology. He is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, and a senior research advisor at the Somali Institute for Health Research. He has published more than 60 papers in reputed journals. His research mainly focus on migration and health and the health of marginalized societies in Africa

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