

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Multidisciplinary Diagnostic Evaluations for Children and Adolescents With a Neurodevelopmental Disorder.

Eva Cloet (✉ eva.cloet@vub.be)

Vrije Universiteit Brussel Faculteit Geneeskunde en Farmacie <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0969-9025>

Jansen Anna

Universitair Ziekenhuis Brussel

Leys Mark

Vrije Universiteit Brussel Faculteit Geneeskunde en Farmacie

Research article

Keywords: Children, youth, Developmental disabilities, Developmental disorders, Diagnostic evaluations, COVID-19, Policy measures, Accessibility, Working processes, Action strategies

Posted Date: July 8th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-670856/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Abstract

Introduction Since the end of 2019, measures have been taken to control the spread of COVID-19. The effects of the pandemic-related precautionary measures on children with developmental disorders require specific attention as these children have greater healthcare needs and mental health concerns, and depend on community-based services for support. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, adequate access to multidisciplinary diagnostic evaluations for children and adolescents with suspected developmental disorders was already problematic. This article aims to explore the impact of the policy measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on the accessibility, changes in working processes and action strategies after the first lockdown period.

Methods A rapid response study was done after the first wave of the virus in Belgium. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was sent out to respondents of all centers for ambulatory rehabilitation, autism reference centers and centers for developmental disorders, three types of organizations identified as main providers of diagnostic evaluations for children and adolescents. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed in an iterative process including researcher triangulation.

Results The response rate was 0.60. All centers reported an impact of COVID-19-related policy measures on accessibility, working processes, working practices, workload, planning, and time management, as well as on the quality of the diagnostic assessments and the contacts with clients. Suggestions to decrease the impact of the pandemic-related measures on the care trajectories of children with (suspected) developmental disorder include the definition of priority groups, a temporary increase of public financing to expand team capacity, a less rigid application of regulatory restrictions as well as a temporary assignment stop.

Conclusion The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the problem of accessibility of multidisciplinary diagnostic evaluations for children suspected of a neurodevelopmental disorder. The organization of health services should guarantee optimal care trajectories for all vulnerable children. Accessibility problems can be reduced by providing “*bridging care*”, helping children and families with needs to overcome “gaps” of care and support during waiting periods. In the long term, an in-depth exploration of mechanisms that strengthen interorganisational collaboration is required to structurally optimize the capacity and accessibility to care for children with suspected neurodevelopmental disorders.

Full Text

This preprint is available for [download as a PDF](#).