

Perspectives and practices of caregivers and healthcare providers about lower respiratory illnesses among 'under-fives' in Uganda: Is asthma under-diagnosed?

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Aim: To explore the perspectives and practices of caregivers and healthcare providers (HCPs) regarding diagnosis and management of respiratory illnesses in 'under-five's in primary care settings in Uganda.

Methods: 25 in-depths interviews were conducted; 8 caregivers with history of recurrent/chronic respiratory symptoms and 17 HCPs (9 clinicians, 4 herbalists, 2 drug shop attendants and 2 community health workers) in Jinja district, Uganda. Data was analysed thematically.

Results: Caregivers mainly attributed the recurrent respiratory symptoms to possible TB, pneumonia or 'normal cough' and only one mentioned asthma. Majority assumed asthma is contagious. They first sought help from health facilities but were often frustrated because, despite the syrups and antibiotics, the symptoms recurred, resulting in repeated hospital visits. They eventually visited herbalists or concluded that witchcraft affected the children. Only 3 of the 8 caretakers were given a diagnosis of asthma, which was not readily accepted due to fear that asthma is a very severe and incurable disease, and that the inhaled medicines were addictive, would cause the disease to advance. Other diagnoses were pneumonia (2/8) although their children repeatedly received antibiotics.

All HCPs attributed the chronic respiratory symptoms to pneumonia or possible TB and only 3 (17.6%) thought about asthma. Clinicians rarely diagnosed asthma because they believed that it cannot affect 'under-fives'. They were hesitant to mention the possibility of asthma to the caregivers. They thought that inhaled medicines were very strong for 'under-fives', very expensive and addictive. Interestingly, the herbalists thought it was an 'easy' disease, curable with local herbs and food supplements.

Conclusion: Perceptions, beliefs and myths regarding diagnosis and management of respiratory illnesses among caregivers and HCPs are diverse and may be contributing to mis-diagnosis of respiratory illnesses in 'under-fives'. Health literacy among caregivers and training of HCPs is recommended.

Work Package 6 Workshop

Declaration of Interest

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