

## Earlier child screening is suggested

By Tim Christie

*The Register-Guard*

Published: Thursday, September 13, 2007

In 2005, a group of Eugene doctors and childhood researchers decided to find out what would happen if pediatricians asked parents to fill out a survey evaluating their child's early development.

They were hoping the systematic screening would catch more children in need of special education services. But what they found far exceeded their expectations.

The number of children, ages 1 and 2, referred for more evaluation because of possible developmental delays increased 224 percent compared with the year before the screening survey was conducted.

Their study, published in the August edition of the journal *Pediatrics*, provides the most persuasive evidence to date for getting parents and pediatricians involved in a systematic program of early childhood screening.

"The earlier you identify a child in need of services, the better," Hollie Hix-Small, a University of Oregon researcher, said Wednesday.

Hix-Small was co-author of the study with Dr. Kevin Marks, a PeaceHealth Medical Group pediatrician; Jane Squires, director of the UO Early Intervention Program; and Dr. Robert Nickel, a professor of pediatrics at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

The study also confirmed Marks' suspicion that pediatricians often are not able to detect developmental problems, particularly involving fine-motor, problem-solving and personal-social skills, in the brief time allotted for well-baby checkups.

"We found that many doctors were simply missing many kids and not because they were taking a 'wait-and-see' approach on possible delays," Marks said.

Doctors are underidentifying children who can benefit from intervention, he said. And the children who often respond best to early intervention - those with mild delays - are the hardest to detect, he said.

Others most likely to benefit from early intervention are those from lower socio-economic background and younger children with early signs of autism, he said.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, which estimates that 12 to 16 percent of American children have developmental delays or behavioral disorders, previously has urged doctors to check for such problems systematically.

Detecting a developmental delay or behavioral disorder at 12, 24 or 36 months can pay huge dividends, the researchers said. Earlier studies have found that early interventions can improve math and reading scores and reduce the risk of substance abuse later in life, Marks said.

The study was conducted between April 2005 and March 2006. When parents or guardians showed up for their children's 12- or 24-month well-baby checkups, PeaceHealth Medical Group pediatricians and nurse-practitioners asked them to complete a child development screening questionnaire at home.

The surveys were sent to EC Cares, a program of the state Education

Department that provides early childhood intervention and special education services. EC Cares officials reviewed the surveys to determine which children needed referrals.

Even though just 54 percent of parents returned the survey, the number of children who were referred for more evaluation increased dramatically: At the 12-month checkup, 40 children were referred, compared with just five in the year before the study. At the 24-month checkup, 67 children were referred, compared with 28 the year earlier.

The majority of the children who got referrals - 72 percent - did so because of the survey results, as opposed to what doctors observed, the study found.

The children were screened with the Ages & Stages Questionnaire, a survey developed about 20 years ago by UO researchers.

The ASQ, as its known, is the most widely used screening tool in the country and is in use around the world.

The survey doesn't diagnose development problems, but helps to identify children who should receive more detailed diagnosis or treatment. For example, it asks parents questions such as: When your child wants something, does she tell you by pointing? And, does your child correctly use at least two words such as me, mine, I and you?

Marks and Hix-Small are hopeful their study, and its publication in the influential *Pediatrics*, will convince more doctors to do early developmental screening routinely.

Marks is part of a group promoting a program called ABCD - Assuring Better Childhood Health Development - that is trying to get standardized screening established in Oregon and 22 other states.

While screening is cheap - the study found that it cost \$1.61 to \$2.43 per patient - persuading health insurers to reimburse doctors for their time is key to getting such programs in wider use, Hix-Small said.

UO researchers are developing a Web-based version of ASQ, which researchers hope will remove another hurdle that keeps parents from completing the survey.