

Pediatric Rehabilitation: Integrating Art Therapy, Early Screening and Bridging Multidisciplinary Care for Rare Genetic Diseases and Autism in the Gulf

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ABSTRACT

Early assessment and timely psychological support are critical to pediatric rehabilitation, particularly for conditions of high prevalence and social impact in Gulf communities such as rare genetic diseases and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), more than 270 genetic diseases have been documented, approximately 60% inherited through autosomal recessive patterns, with birth defects ranking as the fourth leading cause of death (Al-Gazali & Ali, 2010; Christianson et al., 2006). Across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), ASD prevalence continues to rise, with rates reported at 29 per 10,000 in the UAE, 1.4 per 10,000 in Oman, and 1.14% in Qatar (Alrehaili, 2023; Fouad Alshaban et al., 2019). Despite these figures, early screening, timely diagnosis, and culturally adapted interventions remain inconsistent, hindered by fragmented services, stigma, and limited cross-sector collaboration (Hajat et al., 2012). Drawing on clinical practice across Qatar, the UAE, and Singapore, this presentation outlines an integrated rehabilitation model combining early, culturally informed assessment with art therapy and other expressive non-verbal psychotherapeutic approaches. These methods facilitate emotional expression, strengthen ego resilience, and support developmental milestones in children with limited verbal capacity (Slayton et al., 2010). Case studies demonstrate creative strategies adapted to local cultural and religious norms, promote trust, engagement, and family participation. The model emphasizes family inclusion, training for organizations, medical doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals to recognize psychosocial needs utilizing creative methods, integrate therapeutic principles into daily care, and collaborating effectively. Such capacity-building, coupled with coordinated family and community involvement, ensures continuity of support across medical, educational, and social systems. This multidisciplinary and multi-pronged approach bridges the gap between physical and psychological rehabilitation, improving quality of life, resilience, and long-term outcomes for medical and developmentally vulnerable children particularly in the Gulf. Moving forward, aligning these strategies with national health priorities, such as Qatar's National Autism Plan and UAE public health frameworks, while fostering cross-border collaboration with public and private sectors across GCC countries and beyond will strengthen early screening, intervention, treatment effectiveness, sustainability, policy integration, and regional impact.