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Checking the vision of preschool children: A role for public health?

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Background

Every year in Ontario, 3,000 to 5,000 children lose the use of one eye. Countless more do badly in school because they have an eye problem that is not treated in time. Eye problems, such as farsightedness and lazy eye (amblyopia) are important to detect early. McMaster University in partnership with the Hospital for Sick Children conducted a trial program involving 531 children, 19 per cent of whom were found to have previously undetected eye problems. The program is currently being implemented in partnership with three health units in Kirkland Lake, Sarnia, and Woodstock and Norwich. Following the session, participants discussed the possible role of public health in implementing the program universally.

Key takeaways

- Screening and optometry exams for children is extremely important in the early years. Conditions, such as lazy eye (amblyopia), that are not detected before the age of seven may be irreversible and result in the loss of the use of the eye.
- The model that has been developed involves five screening tests that can be conducted on kindergarten children in schools. The entire process takes approximately 15 minutes and it is easy to conduct.

This model was able to detect 21 out of 24 per cent of undetected eye problems.

Public health may have a role in implementing this program.

Implications/conclusions

Public Health used to do vision screening in the 1970s and 1980s. This practice was discontinued due to lack of efficacy. With the new advances in technology, there may be an opportunity to revisit public health's mandate as it relates to vision screening.