

**Asthma in children under 5 years in rural Kyrgyzstan - a diagnostic vacuum? A qualitative FRESH AIR study**

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**Aim:** The study explored the perceptions of asthma in children under 5 years of age (under-fives) among primary care health professionals (HP) and caregivers in rural Kyrgyzstan. Asthma is the most frequent chronic disease in childhood, however apparently often under-diagnosed.

**Method:** Semi-structured qualitative interviews were done in 2016 with 22 rural primary care HPs triangulated with interviews with 13 caregivers to under-fives (12-59 months) with recurrent lower tract respiratory illness,

**Results:** None of the HPs had diagnosed any children under-fives with asthma. HPs biomedical understanding of asthma was severe attacks of respiratory distress, with mandatory heredity and allergy, mostly in adolescents and adults. Most HPs -and caregivers- perceived asthma as a rare and serious, invalidating, potentially fatal disease in young children. All caregivers were acquainted with the term asthma and feared it for their children. Nevertheless, in the consultation, when caregivers asked if their child's recurrent/long-term cough and respiratory distress could be asthma, the HPs seemed to veer away from the asthma diagnosis and filled out 'the diagnostic vacuum' with infectious diagnoses. Despite the concerns, there did not seem to be stigma associated with asthma in the rural society and the caregivers' attitude towards inhaled bronchodilators for respiratory distress was mostly positive, based on experience or hearsay.

**Conclusions:** The apparent systematic under-diagnosis of asthma in rural Kyrgyzstan seemed self-perpetuating. The biomedical understanding and diagnostic tradition had no provision for asthma in under-fives, therefore, few children were diagnosed with asthma, which reinforced the belief in society that asthma is a very severe disease. The HPs filled out 'the diagnostic vacuum' with infectious diagnoses.

**Declaration of Interest**

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