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Raising the profile of childhood MS

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University of Birmingham researchers working with Birmingham Children's Hospital have found that the UK has the world's highest reported national incidence of children who experience their first Multiple Sclerosis-like attack in childhood.

Every year in the British Isles at least 125 children – ten aged between one and 15 in every million – will experience what's thought to be their first MS-like attack. Around 12 of these are in the West Midlands.

The 'attack' is often diagnosed as Clinically Isolated Syndrome (CIS), in which symptoms similar to those found in MS - such as problems with eyesight or numbness in the hands and feet - flare up and then disappear again.

It's thought around one in 20 adults with MS will experience their first symptoms in childhood, but children who experience a second MS attack at a young age are usually diagnosed with childhood MS.

Funded by the MS Society and Action Medical Research, the Birmingham researchers also discovered that the average age for the first MS-like symptom was ten years old, and that in children aged ten and over, more girls than boys were affected – in keeping with the diagnosis ratio that MS affects twice as many women as men.

The data was gathered by surveying paediatricians and ophthalmologists from across the UK – asking them to report if they had treated children presenting MS-like symptoms. The results have been published in the **Multiple Sclerosis (http://msj.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/04/19/1352458512445944.1.full)** Journal and were compared with findings from similar studies carried out in Canada and Germany, which reported slightly lower rates.

Researchers hope these findings will help to raise the profile of childhood MS among health professionals, potentially leading to a quicker diagnosis and more tailored support for young people.

Michael Absoud, Clinical Research Fellow at the University, who worked on the study, said: *'This study, one part of a five year research project funded by the MS Society and Action Medical Research, will help to raise awareness of childhood MS among doctors seeing children with a possible first MS-like symptom, and encourage early referral for a specialist opinion.*

'Knowing how many children are at risk of developing MS later in life will help the future design of clinical trials and further paediatric MS research, which will improve access to medication, help reduce the number of attacks during the important school years and potentially slow down the disability.

'Our second study will focus on finding out which of the children who have a MS like illness are more likely to develop MS, and how this illness develops and by following them into adulthood, will provide the basis for an important long-term study."

Dr Evangeline Wassmer, Paediatric Neurologist at Birmingham Children's Hospital, said: *'My hope is that the acknowledgement of childhood MS in the UK will lead to early diagnosis and treatment and improve the quality of life of children with the condition.*'

Dr Doug Brown, Head of Biomedical Research at the MS Society, added: *'Around one in 20 adults with MS experience their first symptoms in childhood, so this is an incredibly important area of research for us. Historically MS has always been considered as an older person's condition, but we're now seeing people diagnosed much younger, so the more we understand about childhood MS the better health professionals can be at diagnosing the condition and offering treatment and vital support to young people and their families.'*

Multiple sclerosis is a condition of the central nervous system, causing problems with mobility and balance, memory and thinking, eyesight, bladder control and severe fatigue.

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