Right kids, right service, right time: developmental surveillance in early childhood

Introduction
Around 25% of children are developmentally vulnerable according to the Australian Early Development Indicator. The incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is approximately 1% in Australia. Children who are at risk for developmental delays and autism would benefit from early identification and access to, as this takes advantage of children’s early brain plasticity. Research has shown that ASDs and other developmental disabilities can be reliably detected in children as young as 18 months of age, although there has been no screening tool with sufficient psychometric properties to recommend its use universally. Furthermore, screening and diagnostic practices have historically been sporadic in the community and many developmentally vulnerable children are not identified until late preschool or school age. Childcare settings present an ideal opportunity for ongoing developmental surveillance and appropriate, timely referral of young children to allied health supports.

Aims
To examine how young children who are at risk for developmental challenges can be identified through developmental surveillance in the early childhood education setting and how this process is used to inform opportunities for support and intervention through timely and accurate links with allied health early intervention specialists across regional and rural areas.

Methods
This review of literature will provide contextualising information about current policies, practices and recommendations in developmental surveillance of young children in Australia and internationally. A critical analysis of research pertaining to the early identification of ASD will be presented and the need for further research into the process of developmental surveillance of young children in the Australian context will be highlighted.

Results
The intended outcome of this project is to understand the role early childhood education professionals can play in early identification and referral of young children. The utility of an autism-specific developmental surveillance tool as compared to a general developmental parent report tool by early childhood educators in the process of early identification of ASD will also be determined.

Discussion
An expected benefit would be to build capacity and skills in the early childcare and education community to implement routine developmental surveillance and effectively identify and refer children who are at risk for developmental challenges including ASD to appropriate early intervention services. Through specific early detection practices, families of children who are at risk for autism or other developmental challenges will be able to access specialised support, intervention and resources in a timely manner to maximize developmental potential.