Reviewer's report

Title: Insomnia in school-age children with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism.

Version: Date: 2 February 2006

Reviewer: Luci Wiggs

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General
This is an interesting and original paper concerned with an important topic and the authors have attempted to address the research questions in a systematic and clinically relevant manner. Below are some suggestions for how the write-up could be altered to, in my opinion, improve the clarity and informativeness of the paper.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Pg 7 - Assessment of inclusion and exclusion criteria (eg. diagnosis of AS, intellectual disability, seizure disorder) need to be explained more. Although references are provided about the reassessment of the children’s AS, these references are 'in press' so one can’t judge this procedure and neither is it clear which diagnostic reassessment tool (if any) was used.

Pg 7 – control group – more information about ‘how’ the control group were recruited would be helpful. Presumably, if they were individually matched with a child in the AS group, school nurses were asked to suggest a child of a particular age and sex who fulfilled the other inclusion/exclusion criteria… how did they decide which child (of the many who might be suitable? Randomly, next name on register, friend of AS child (I am assuming that the AS child was probably at the same school, is that right?) Some more detail would be helpful.

The study involved the use of many statistical tests, such that probability of Type I errors is increased…A comment about how the authors dealt with this would be helpful.

Pg 16, first para - As there are many approaches to the treatment of paediatric insomnia I would state this explicitly and give a reference and clarify that the one that the authors are describing (bedtime fading) is one which may be particularly appropriate for the treatment of children with a delayed sleep onset. Further, I think that at the end of that paragraph the final sentence should be extended to explain how their results (that children with and without insomnia had similar bedtimes) support the idea that the children can’t fall asleep (rather than they are being put to bed too early).

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Pg 8 – the third paragraph should go in the Results section and ‘other sociodemographic variables’ which were examined should be explicitly stated.

Pg 9 – Table 2 is referred to for the first time in the first paragraph and Table 1 for the first time in the second paragraph. As such, these tables should be re-named so that the first one mentioned is table 1.
Pg 9/pag 10 – Giving the number of children with AS and controls who fulfil criteria for paediatric insomnia should go in the Results section. The definition should be explained here in the methods section but the numbers not given here on pages 9 and 10.

Pg 10 – It reads strangely to say ‘We decided that none of these coexisting sleep-wake behaviours etc…’. The basis of that decision needs explanation.

Pg 13 – as detailed above mention of results being presented ‘in the Methods section’ should be removed and these results repositioned in the paper.

Pg 13 – there seems to be something funny and inconsistent about the use of headings/subheadings here: The paragraph currently underneath ‘Comparison between children with and without insomnia in the AS/HFA group’ should be moved to the preceding section (and expanded with reference to the Table, as described) since this deals with differences between the AS/HFA group and controls. Then, under the heading ‘Comparison between children with and without insomnia in the AS/HFA group’ would be reports of the actigraphy and behaviour of the insomniacs/non-insomniacs. It would be interesting to see if other sleep behaviours (described in the questionnaire) differed between those with and without insomnia (this would form another section); although, by definition the insomnia group shouldn’t include children with ‘other sleep disorders’ it seems that the authors did include children with some frequent sleep behaviours (eg. snoring) and, as such, a description of these other behaviours, by group, would be interesting.

Pg 14 – To save readers having to refer back to the methods section it would be helpful (and appropriate, to put the significant results in context) to remind readers of all the actigraphy variables which were examined but which were non-significant (eg. just a line to say ‘X, X and X showed no significant difference between the two groups’)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Pg 5 - The background is somewhat ‘list-like’ to read and some of the results (eg. those of Polimeni, Richdale and Francis) do not correspond with the authors’ conclusions that insomnia is more common in children with autism spectrum disorders so perhaps their conclusions about this should be tempered to say that some studies have found insomnia to be particularly common.

Pg 7 (and elsewhere) I would consider changing the word ‘ongoing’ medication because this sounds like children taking medication for a short period (ie. not ongoing but for a finite period) could be included and, of course, this is not the case (I think!)

Pg 10 – line 6 – insert ‘children’ after the number ‘4’.

Pg 11, Behavioural Characteristics, line 3 – the words ‘items covering’ should be inserted after the numbers 6 and 5

Pg 13, line 1 – delete ‘the’ before SPSS

Pg 15, line 5, I would delete the word ‘Obviously’ and replace with ‘The results of our study could not confirm these findings’
What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests