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## **Disease related variables and psychological problems among chronically ill children in Malaysia**

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**Abstract.** *Aims:* The study examines disease related variables that may exacerbate psychological problems among children with chronic illness in Malaysia. *Methods:* Parents' ratings of children behavioral and emotional problems (i.e. Child Behavior Checklist – CBCL), disease-related and socio-demographic information were obtained from 63 parents of children suffering from cancer, epilepsy, and asthma seen in Institute of Pediatrics, Kuala Lumpur General Hospital. *Results:* The results showed positive and significant relationship between frequency of hospitalization and a later onset of illness and psychological problems in children. Children in the age group of 7-11 years were reported to have the highest number of problems as compared to other age groups. There were no significant relationships between duration of illness, children's gender, number of siblings, and number of years attending school and psychological problems in children. Recurrent hospitalization and the onset of disease in the later childhood are amongst the most potent factors contributing toward the psychological problems of chronically ill children. There is an urgent need to further develop existing children and adolescent health facilities in Malaysian hospitals by directly involve mental health experts and promoting their services to both medical practitioners and service recipients.

**Keywords:** children, chronic illness, hospitalization, behavioural problems.

### **1. Introduction**

In Malaysia, a nation-wide population based prevalence of childhood chronic illnesses is yet to be adequately reported. However, some survey studies indicate an increasing trend in the chronic illness among children including cancer which is estimated to be 77.4% per million Malaysian children [1]. The finding from the National Psychiatric Morbidity survey indicates that chronically ill children contributes a significantly higher proportion in the 13% of the overall adjusted prevalence of psychiatric morbidity in Malaysian children [2]. This is not surprising because many large-scale epidemiological surveys indicate that chronically ill children are at a greater risk of psychological problems than children without such conditions [3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. Some studies suggested they were thrice more at risk for psychiatric disorder and 'considerable' risk for social maladjustment, impairment in self care, communication and learning as compared to healthy children [8, 9]. Evidence suggested they experience anxiety and depression [3, 10], difficulties in peer group relationships [11], excessive usage of denials, recurring themes of feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and general confusion in over 70% of their projective drawings [12, 13, 14].

Disease-related and demographic variables are the psychosocial and circumstantial conditions that may mitigate or exacerbate the sufferings of the chronically ill child. Lots of research has showing that hospital admission can, at least in the short-term period, cause serious adverse effects on the child's well-being. Hospital admission exposes a child to stressors such as separation from the family, school and friends, pain of treatment, unfamiliarity with the surroundings, and fear of the unknown [15]. Hospitalized children are expected to adjust to a fear-producing hospital environment characterized by a state of helpless dependency, immobilization, and a limited freedom of movement [16]. Most children showed an increase in negative behavior for about two weeks after being discharged from the hospital, regardless of their age or medical condition [17]. Children who were not well prepared for hospital admission and who were subjected to invasive procedures showed increased verbal and physical aggression, behavioral regression, and greater anxiety [18]. A retrospective study on the effects of hospitalisation found a disturbing association between