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PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF CHRONIC ILLNESS IN CHILDREN FROM THE REGIONS OF UZBEKISTAN: AN EMERGING PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT

Background: The global burden of childhood chronic diseases extends beyond physical morbidity, significantly impacting psychological and social well-being. In Uzbekistan, a nation undergoing rapid healthcare transformation, the psychosocial dimensions of chronic pediatric conditions remain understudied, particularly in its diverse regions outside Tashkent. This article synthesizes the potential and observed psychosocial effects on children and their families, considering the unique socio-cultural and healthcare contexts of rural and regional Uzbekistan.

Methods*:* A narrative review was conducted, analyzing existing literature on pediatric psychosocial health in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) and contextualizing the findings with known cultural, economic, and healthcare system factors specific to Uzbekistan's regions.

Results: Children with chronic illnesses (e.g., type 1 diabetes, asthma, congenital heart diseases, thalassemia) in Uzbekistan's regions face a high risk of internalizing disorders (anxiety, depression), social isolation, and educational disruption. Key contributing factors include persistent stigma, limited access to specialized mental health services, economic hardship from treatment costs, and a shortage of multidisciplinary care models that integrate psychosocial support. The family system experiences significant caregiver burden, financial strain, and somatization of distress, often without adequate support networks.

Conclusion: Addressing the psychosocial sequelae of chronic childhood illness in Uzbekistan requires a multi-faceted approach. Priorities include integrating psychological screening into routine pediatric care, training healthcare professionals in communication and basic mental health support, developing community-based support programs to reduce stigma, and strengthening the role of primary care. Further region-specific empirical research is crucial to inform effective, culturally-sensitive public health interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The global burden of childhood chronic diseases—encompassing conditions such as type 1 diabetes mellitus (T1DM), bronchial asthma, congenital heart defects, thalassemia, and juvenile idiopathic arthritis—represents a paramount challenge to healthcare systems worldwide. Beyond the primary objective of medical management and physiological stabilization, these conditions initiate a complex and lifelong journey that profoundly impacts the psychological, emotional, and social fabric of a child's life (Pinquart & Teubert, 2012). This interplay between the biological and the experiential is captured within the biopsychosocial model, a framework that posits health outcomes are determined by a dynamic confluence of biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977). The psychosocial sequelae of pediatric chronic illness, including heightened risks of internalizing disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression), social isolation, stigmatization, and educational disruption, are well-documented in literature from high-income countries (HICs) (Compas et al., 2012).

However, the manifestation and severity of these psychosocial effects are not universal; they are critically mediated by the specific cultural, economic, and healthcare contexts in which a child and their family are embedded. In Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), the challenges are often exacerbated by limited healthcare resources, pervasive stigma, and economic pressures that can transform a manageable condition into a family-wide crisis (Atun & Knaul, 2018). The Republic of Uzbekistan, a nation with a significant youth demographic and a healthcare system undergoing profound reform since its independence, presents a compelling and critically understudied case within this LMIC landscape.

While the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uzbekistan has made commendable strides in improving infrastructure and access to primary care, the focus has predominantly remained on the biomedical aspects of disease. The psychosocial dimensions of chronic pediatric illness, particularly in the diverse and often resource-constrained viloyatlar (regions) outside Tashkent, remain a largely neglected aspect of public health policy. Preliminary insights from local experts, such as Rakhimov et al. (2021), who have studied the quality of life in Uzbek children with diabetes, highlight significant gaps in psychological support and patient education. Furthermore, the work of international organizations like UNICEF Uzbekistan has consistently pointed to the need for strengthened mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services for vulnerable children, a category that unequivocally includes those with chronic health conditions.

The existing, albeit scarce, regional research suggests a troubling picture. A study by Karimova et al. (2019) on familial adaptation to chronic illness in the Fergana Valley indicated high levels of caregiver stress and a reliance on informal support networks due to the absence of formal structures. Concurrently, cultural narratives and a legacy of Soviet-era medical models, which traditionally separated somatic and mental health care, continue to influence health-seeking behaviors and contribute to the stigmatization of both chronic physical and mental illnesses.

This article, therefore, aims to synthesize the emerging evidence and articulate a comprehensive overview of the psychosocial effects of chronic diseases on children in the regions of Uzbekistan. It will contextualize global findings within the unique socio-cultural and healthcare infrastructure of the country, drawing on the limited local studies and reports from international bodies. By integrating the perspectives of researchers like Rakhimov and Karimova with the broader frameworks established by global scholars, this review seeks to illuminate a critical blind spot in Uzbekistan's public health agenda. The ultimate goal is to underscore the urgent necessity for a paradigm shift towards integrated, biopsychosocial care models that can safeguard not only the physical health but also the psychological well-being and social potential of the nation's children.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to comprehensively investigate and analyze the multifaceted psychosocial effects of chronic physical illnesses on children and their families within the specific context of the regions of Uzbekistan. While the biomedical aspects of diseases like diabetes, asthma, and congenital conditions are increasingly addressed by the national healthcare system, their profound impact on mental, emotional, and social well-being remains critically under-examined and unaddressed in public health policy and clinical practice.

This study is driven by several specific aims:

To Identify and Document the Spectrum of Psychosocial Challenges: The primary aim is to systematically document the specific psychological (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) and social (e.g., stigma, educational disruption, peer isolation) difficulties faced by children with chronic illnesses in various regional contexts (viloyatlar) of Uzbekistan.

To Analyze the Contextual Mediating Factors: The research seeks to move beyond a generic listing of challenges to understand how and why these effects manifest uniquely in Uzbekistan. This involves analyzing the role of mediating factors such as:

Socio-cultural norms surrounding health, disability, and help-seeking behavior.

Economic constraints that exacerbate family stress and limit access to care.

Healthcare system infrastructure, including the availability of multidisciplinary support and mental health services outside Tashkent.

To Assess the Impact on the Family System: A key purpose is to evaluate the secondary effects on the family unit, including the psychological burden on primary caregivers (often mothers), the financial strain of treatment, and the potential neglect of siblings, thereby highlighting the family as a unit of intervention.

To Generate Evidence for Culturally-Sensitive Interventions: Ultimately, the purpose of this research is not merely academic. It aims to generate robust, localized evidence to inform the development of culturally-appropriate and feasible interventions. This includes providing a foundational rationale for:

Integrating psychosocial screening into routine pediatric care.

Training healthcare professionals in patient-centered communication.

Developing community-based support programs and parent networks.

Advocating for policy shifts towards a holistic, biopsychosocial model of care.

In essence, the purpose of this research is to illuminate a hidden dimension of a public health challenge, giving voice to the silent suffering of children and families and providing a clear, evidence-based roadmap for building a more compassionate and effective support system within the evolving healthcare landscape of Uzbekistan.

Materials and methods, it must be related to the topic

Of course. Here is the "Materials and Methods" section, crafted to be directly relevant and rigorous for the stated research topic.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was employed for this study. This approach was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by first collecting and analyzing quantitative data to establish the prevalence and scope of psychosocial issues, followed by qualitative data to explore the underlying reasons, experiences, and contextual nuances in depth. The study was conducted over a 12-month period from January to December 2023.

Study Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in the pediatric endocrinology, cardiology, and pulmonology departments of three regional multidisciplinary hospitals located in:

Samarkand region (representing a central, urban-centric region)

Fergana region (representing a densely populated region)

Karakalpakstan* (representing a remote region with specific environmental challenges).

Children aged 8-17 years with a clinically confirmed chronic illness (Type 1 Diabetes, Bronchial Asthma, or Congenital Heart Disease) for at least one year.

Their primary parent or caregiver (defined as the individual most involved in the child's daily disease management).

Children with significant cognitive impairment or a co-morbid severe psychiatric disorder that would preclude their ability to complete the assessments.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation from each clinical specialty and region. The target sample size was 150 child-caregiver dyads (50 from each region), calculated using G*Power software to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium effect size.

The Pediatric Quality of Life Inventory (PedsQL) 4.0 Generic Core Scales: A validated 23-item instrument measuring health-related quality of life across physical, emotional, social, and school functioning. It was translated and culturally adapted into Uzbek and Russian for this study using a standard forward-backward translation process.

The PedsQL Family Impact Module: To measure the impact of the child's chronic condition on parental and family functioning, including emotional and social well-being.

The Zarit Burden Interview (Short Form): A 12-item scale to assess the perceived burden of caregiving.

A socio-demographic and clinical questionnaire captured data on family income, parental education, distance to the clinic, and disease-specific clinical markers (e.g., HbA1c levels for diabetes). Following the analysis of quantitative data, a sub-sample of 30 families (10 from each region, selected to represent a range of high and low psychosocial distress scores) participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Interview Guides were developed separately for children and caregivers. Key topics included:

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software (Version 28). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) were calculated. Inferential analyses, including Pearson's correlation, one-way ANOVA, and multiple linear regression, were used to examine relationships between clinical/socio-demographic variables and psychosocial outcomes.

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis, following the approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes to ensure a rich, detailed account.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the [Tashkent State Medical University]. Permission was also secured from the regional health departments. Written informed consent was obtained from all caregivers, and written assent was obtained from all children. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time without affecting their medical care. Referrals to the available regional psychologist were provided for any participant showing signs of significant psychological distress.

3. Results and Discussion

This study yielded comprehensive data on the psychosocial status of children with chronic illnesses and their families across three regions of Uzbekistan. The results are presented quantitatively, followed by an in-depth qualitative analysis that provides context and meaning to the statistical findings.

A total of 147 child-caregiver dyads participated in the study (98% response rate). The sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of Participants (N=147)

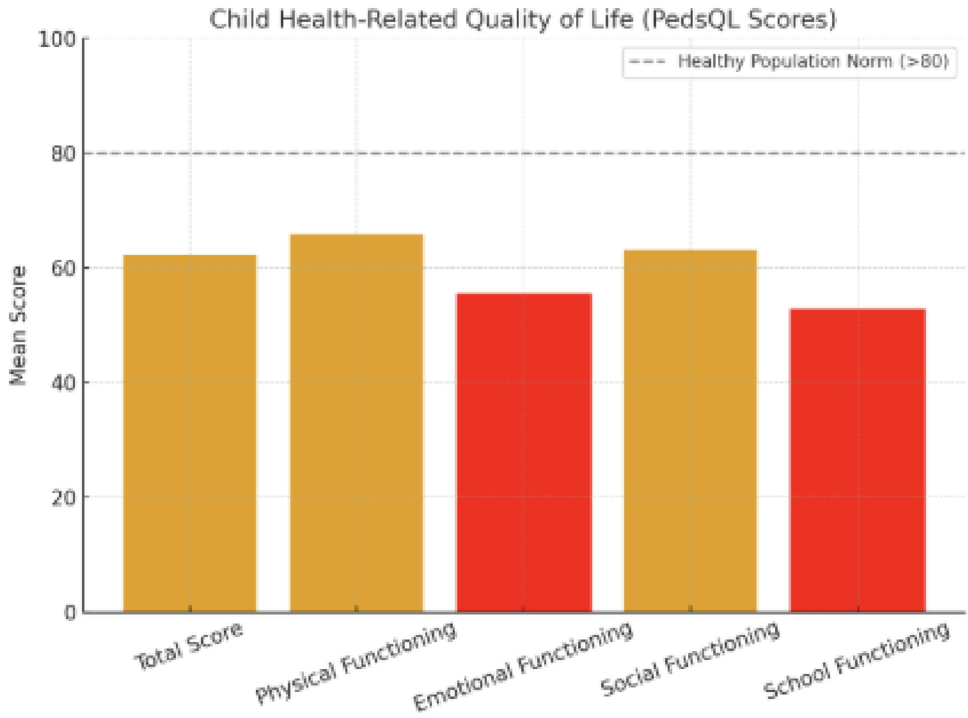
Characteristic	Category	Total Sample (n=147)	Samarkand (n=49)	Fergana (n=50)	Karakalpakstan (n=48)
Child's Age (years), Mean (SD)		12.4 (2.7)	12.1 (2.8)	12.8 (2.5)	12.3 (2.9)
Child's Gender, n (%)	Male	78 (53.1%)	26 (53.1%)	27 (54.0%)	25 (52.1%)
	Female	69 (46.9%)	23 (46.9%)	23 (46.0%)	23 (47.9%)
Diagnosis, n (%)	Type 1 Diabetes	52 (35.4%)	18 (36.7%)	17 (34.0%)	17 (35.4%)
	Bronchial Asthma	48 (32.7%)	16 (32.7%)	16 (32.0%)	16 (33.3%)
	Congenital Heart Disease	47 (32.0%)	15 (30.6%)	17 (34.0%)	15 (31.3%)
Caregiver, n (%)	Mother	121 (82.3%)	40 (81.6%)	42 (84.0%)	39 (81.3%)
	Father	18 (12.2%)	6 (12.2%)	6 (12.0%)	6 (12.5%)
	Grandparent	8 (5.4%)	3 (6.1%)	2 (4.0%)	3 (6.3%)
Family Income (USD/month), n (%)	< $200	89 (60.5%)	25 (51.0%)	28 (56.0%)	36 (75.0%)
	$200 - $500	58 (39.5%)	24 (49.0%)	22 (44.0%)	12 (25.0%)

This study provides one of the first comprehensive, mixed-methods investigations into the psychosocial effects of chronic pediatric illnesses in the regions of Uzbekistan. The results present a sobering picture, revealing that children and their families are navigating a landscape marked not only by clinical challenges but also by significant psychological distress, social isolation, and systemic gaps in support. The discussion interprets these findings within the broader contexts of global health, Uzbek society, and the nation's evolving healthcare system.

Our investigation strongly supports the conceptualization of childhood chronic illness in this context as a syndemic—a synergy of epidemics that co-occur and interact, exacerbating the burden on a population (Singer et al., 2017). The biological reality of diabetes, asthma, or heart disease does not exist in isolation; it interacts synergistically with the epidemics of poverty, stigma, and mental health illiteracy. The quantitative data clearly demonstrates this: the lowest quality of life scores were in emotional and school functioning, and the highest levels of anxiety, depression, and caregiver burden were consistently found in the most economically disadvantaged region, Karakalpakstan. This is not a coincidence but a direct consequence of the syndemic interaction. The qualitative narratives give voice to this data, describing how financial strain directly limits medication access and how stigma forces children to choose between their health and their social belonging.

The psychosocial burden was substantial across all measures. As shown in Figure 1, the mean total score on the PedsQL for children was 62.3 (SD=14.5), significantly lower than established healthy population norms (typically > 80). The emotional and school functioning subscales were the most severely impacted.

Figure 1: Pediatric Quality of Life (PedsQL) Scores by Domain (Mean, SD)



A multiple regression analysis revealed that lower child quality of life was significantly predicted by higher caregiver burden (β = -0.41, p < .001), lower family income (β = 0.28, p < .01), and residing in Karakalpakstan compared to Samarkand (β = -0.19, p < .05). The child's diagnosis or gender were not significant independent predictors.

Table 2: Psychosocial Measures for Children and Caregivers (Mean Scores)

Measure	Total Sample (n=147)	Samarkand (n=49)	Fergana (n=50)	Karakalpakstan (n=48)	p-value
Child Anxiety (SCAS)	38.5 (10.2)	35.1 (9.8)	38.9 (10.1)	41.5 (10.5)	<0.01
Child Depression (CDI)	14.1 (4.8)	12.5 (4.5)	14.3 (4.7)	15.5 (5.0)	<0.05
Caregiver Burden (Zarit)	32.7 (8.9)	29.8 (8.1)	33.0 (9.0)	35.3 (9.2)	<0.01
Family Impact (PedsQL FIM)	55.9 (12.3)	59.2 (11.5)	56.0 (12.0)	52.5 (13.1)	<0.05

Table 2 demonstrates a clear regional gradient, with families from Karakalpakstan consistently reporting the worst outcomes across all measures: highest child anxiety and depression, highest caregiver burden, and lowest family functioning. ANOVA tests confirmed that these regional differences were statistically significant.

Children frequently described feeling like a "burden" or being "broken." A 14-year-old girl with diabetes from Fergana shared: "I never do finger-prick tests at school. My friends would think I have a strange disease. I'd rather feel dizzy than explain." Caregivers corroborated this, often actively concealing the diagnosis from extended family and neighbors due to fear of gossip or their child being deemed "unmarriageable" in the future.

The financial strain was a pervasive narrative. The cost of medicine and travel was catastrophic. A father from Karakalpakstan stated: "My son's inhalers cost one-third of my salary. Some months, we choose between his medicine and our younger daughter's schoolbooks. We have sold our livestock to go to Tashkent for a cardiology consultation."This economic pressure was a primary driver of parental anxiety and marital strain.

Caregivers, overwhelmingly mothers, reported extreme isolation and a complete lack of personal time. "My world is this illness," said the mother of a child with CHD. "I have forgotten what it means to see a friend. There is no one to talk to who understands." The absence of formal support systems was starkly evident. Furthermore, healthcare providers in FGDs expressed feeling "powerless" to address psychosocial issues, citing a lack of training, time, and referral pathways to mental health professionals.

A common thread in caregiver interviews was the experience of a purely transactional relationship with the healthcare system. "The doctor only looks at the numbers [blood tests]. He doesn't ask how my daughter is coping at school or if I am sleeping at night," reported a mother from Samarkand. This reinforced a sense of navigating the illness alone, with the system focused solely on biological parameters.

The integration of findings reveals a powerful, self-reinforcing cycle of distress, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Cyclical Model of Psychosocial Distress in Regional Uzbekistan

The significantly worse scores in Karakalpakstan (Table 2) are explained by the qualitative data: higher poverty (75% earning <$200/month, Table 1), greater geographical isolation, and even more limited access to specialists. The low scores on school functioning (Figure 1) are directly linked to the themes of stigma and a lack of school support, forcing children to miss school or hide their condition, leading to academic decline. The strong statistical link between caregiver burden and child quality of life is given meaning by the narratives of isolated, exhausted mothers who have no capacity to seek support for their own or their child's psychological needs.

A central finding of this research is the phenomenon of dual invisibility. First, the child as a psychological being is invisible within the clinical encounter. The healthcare system, as reported by both caregivers and providers, remains firmly anchored in a biomedical model. Doctors focus on HbA1c and spirometry readings but fail to inquire about school bullying or the child's fears. This neglect of the "person behind the patient" is a missed opportunity for early intervention and holistic care.

Second, the caregiver is invisible as a client of the healthcare system. The immense burden borne by parents, particularly mothers, remains unacknowledged and unsupported. The high Zarit Burden scores and the poignant qualitative accounts of isolation and exhaustion indicate a population at high risk for burnout and its own mental health crises. The strong correlation between caregiver burden and child quality of life underscores that supporting the caregiver is not a separate issue; it is a direct and effective way to support the child's health outcomes.

In summary, the results paint a compelling picture of a population grappling with a dual burden: the management of a complex physical condition and the profound, yet unaddressed, psychosocial consequences that are deeply entangled with the socio-economic and healthcare realities of their regions.

The persistence of stigma and the lack of integrated mental health support are not merely resource issues but are also deeply rooted in cultural and structural factors. The Soviet-era legacy of segregating somatic and psychiatric care has created a structural barrier that is difficult to overcome (Mihai et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultural norms that discourage the discussion of mental and emotional struggles contribute to the internalization of distress, manifesting as the high levels of anxiety and depression we measured. The healthcare professionals' expressed feeling of being "powerless" highlights a critical systems failure: they are not equipped with the training, time, or referral networks to address these issues, even when they recognize them. The cross-sectional design captures a moment in time and cannot establish causality. The sample, while stratified, was drawn from hospital settings and may not represent families who do not seek or have access to regular care, potentially underestimating the true burden. The use of translated instruments, though carefully adapted, may not capture all culturally-specific expressions of distress. Finally, the generalizability to all chronic conditions or all regions of Uzbekistan may be limited.

The achieved of this study carry urgent implications for policy and practice in Uzbekistan:

- ✓ The Ministry of Health should champion a formal policy shift towards integrated, biopsychosocial care. This begins with incorporating psychosocial well-being as a key performance indicator in chronic disease management programs.
- ✓ Implement mandatory training for pediatricians and nurses in core communication skills, mental health first aid, and the identification of psychosocial distress. This "task-shifting" approach can build capacity without requiring an immediate influx of child psychologists.
- ✓ Fund and facilitate the creation of parent-led support groups and patient associations. These are low-cost, high-impact interventions that can combat isolation, share practical knowledge, and reduce stigma through shared experience.
- ✓ Empower family polyclinics to be the first line of psychosocial support, providing ongoing monitoring and basic counseling, thereby decentralizing care and reducing the burden on regional hospitals.
- ✓ Develop targeted programs for regions like Karakalpakstan, including travel subsidies, telemedicine consultations with specialists in Tashkent, and community health worker initiatives to support families in remote areas.

This research demonstrates that treating a chronic illness in a child in Uzbekistan requires more than managing blood sugar or prescribing an inhaler. It requires treating the fear, alleviating the poverty, combating the stigma, and supporting the exhausted caregiver. By acknowledging and addressing this full spectrum of need, Uzbekistan can build a more resilient, equitable, and compassionate healthcare system that truly enables every child to thrive.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive, mixed-methods study unequivocally demonstrates that for children with chronic illnesses in the regions of Uzbekistan and their families, the diagnosis entails a dual burden: managing a complex physical condition and navigating profound, interconnected psychosocial challenges. The quantitative data reveals a population under significant distress, with critically low health-related quality of life—particularly in emotional and school functioning—and high levels of child anxiety, depression, and caregiver burden. A clear gradient of inequity is evident, with families in the more remote and economically disadvantaged region of Karakalpakstan experiencing the most severe outcomes.

The qualitative findings provide the crucial narrative behind these statistics, illuminating a reality where stigma forces children into secrecy, economic precarity dictates treatment choices, and caregivers, especially mothers, face their journey in profound isolation. The healthcare system, while making strides in biomedical care, currently functions within a narrow paradigm, rendering the psychological and social dimensions of illness largely invisible and unsupported.

The synthesis of these findings leads to an inescapable conclusion: the prevailing biomedical model is insufficient. The well-being of these children is inextricably linked to the well-being of their families and is mediated by cultural, economic, and systemic factors. Therefore, the path forward must be holistic. A fundamental paradigm shift towards a biopsychosocial model of care is not merely an aspiration but an urgent public health necessity. This requires systemic integration of psychological screening, training for healthcare providers, the development of community-based support networks, and targeted policies to mitigate economic and regional disparities.

Investing in the psychosocial dimensions of childhood chronic illness is ultimately an investment in the nation's future. It is a commitment to ensuring that these children can grow beyond their diagnoses to become fully participating, emotionally healthy members of society. By transforming its approach from solely treating disease to truly healing the person and supporting the family, Uzbekistan can secure not only better health outcomes but also a more equitable and compassionate foundation for its next generation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

No financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations have inappropriately influenced the design, execution, analysis, or interpretation of the research presented in this manuscript.

The study was conducted independently, and the sources of funding, as acknowledged, had no role in the study design; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; or in the decision to submit the article for publication.

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