

Programs help keep newborns healthy

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At the beginning of the last century, the birth of a new baby was a fearful time for families. Approximately 10% of all babies did not survive to see their first birthday. In some US cities, up to 30% of infants died before reaching one year old. Happily, the 20th century was a time of incredible improvement in infant health – Durham’s current infant mortality rate is down to 6 deaths for every 1,000 live births (the infant mortality rate is the number of babies who die before they are one year old).

There are many reasons for the decline in infant mortality over the past 100 years, including overall improvements in hygiene, nutrition, and healthcare quality. But a key part of the solution has been healthcare programs directed at pregnant women and babies. In 1920, the Sheppard-Towner Act, one of the first federal-level public health programs, created maternal and child health programs in most states and established a tradition of special attention to this population. Maternal and child health became Title V of the Social Security Act in 1935, and a special population for Medicaid in 1986.

Today, there are several programs here in Durham ensuring access to healthcare for pregnant women. Low-income uninsured women have access to Medicaid during pregnancy. Lincoln Community Health Center and the Durham County Health Department teamed up to provide an obstetric clinic for low-income families. This clinic includes the Baby Love maternity care coordination and WIC nutrition assistance. They also offer the “Centering” model of group prenatal care, which is a strategy for women who have little to no emotional support during their pregnancies.

Yet, despite such a drastic decrease in our infant mortality rate, it is still higher than it should be. An international comparison is embarrassing: 44 countries have better infant survival rates than the US, including Cuba, South Korea, and the Czech Republic. Why, with our incredibly advanced health care system and specific programs for pregnant women and babies, is our infant mortality rate so high?

One clue lies in the disparity of rates. Here in Durham, as in the rest of the country, minority babies have a much lower rate of survival – they are more than three times likely to die in their first year compared to white babies. We know that minority status is also associated with lack of insurance and poverty. Research has shown that poor reproductive outcomes (such as low birth weight and premature babies, two of the most common causes of infant mortality) are associated with social factors such as stress and lack of social support throughout women’s lives. It appears infant mortality is acting as an indicator for the overall well-being of our population, and is not a result of conditions during pregnancy alone. So the conclusion that researchers and public health professionals have reached is that women must be healthy throughout their lives, not just while pregnant, in order to help their babies survive their first year.

Access to healthcare is an important component to women’s health. Statistics show that 44% of pregnancies in North Carolina are unintended. By the time many woman are sure that they are

pregnant, there has already been fetal growth and development that is critical to the baby's health. For example, by two months gestation, a baby's neural tube has formed, which will become its spinal cord; it has been proven that good nutrition, including folic acid, can prevent a great number of neural tube defects such as spina bifida.

Some health conditions with potential to harm a pregnancy, such as sexually transmitted infections and diabetes, should be treated or controlled before a woman becomes pregnant, in order to lessen their effects. Consistent primary care can help provide such treatment and information to women of reproductive age.

The evidence is showing us that it is not enough to only provide quality healthcare to women while they are pregnant to prevent infant mortality. Healthy pregnancies depend on women's lifelong health, or "preconceptional" health. Therefore, women (and, we would argue, their families) should have consistent access to healthcare throughout their lives. The century-long effort to prevent infant mortality in the US gives us an interesting test case on the access to healthcare issue – healthcare cannot be isolated to specific periods of peoples' lives, and be effective. Just as every pregnancy deserves a healthy outcome, everyone here in the City of Medicine ought to have the healthcare they need. That would give a great start to Durham's families.

CLIP 'n' SAVE

Services located at Lincoln Community Health Center

1301 Fayetteville St.
956-4024

Durham County Health Department Maternity Clinic – provides comprehensive prenatal services to pregnant women; sliding scale fees based on a family income.

WIC - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program - provides food to low-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, infants and children until the age of five. The program provides a combination of nutrition education, supplemental foods, and breastfeeding promotion and support.

Durham County Health Department Baby Love Program – care coordination for low-income pregnant women from the beginning of pregnancy through the postpartum period. Specially trained Maternity Care Coordinators assist pregnant women in obtaining medical care and an array of social support services such as transportation, housing, job training and day care. Maternal Outreach Workers are also available to provide peer support.

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Medicaid – Healthcare coverage for pregnant women and their unborn children for pregnancy-related care families whose income is less than or equal to 185% of the poverty level (\$18,130

for one person, \$37,000 for a family of four). If a pregnant woman is covered by Medicaid, her newborn child is automatically eligible for Medicaid up to age 1.

To apply, contact the Department of Social Services

300 N. Duke St.

560-8000

March of Dimes – lots of information on infant mortality, premature births, and pregnancy, available on their website <http://www.marchofdimes.com/>