

Lessons Learned from Public Health Reviews of Congenital Syphilis Cases in Western Australia

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Background/Purpose:

Congenital syphilis (CS) is a serious public health concern and can result in still births or babies with serious sequelae. In WA, CS notifications increased from three cases in the 10-year period 2008 to 2017 to 18 cases in the 6-year period 2018 to 2023.

Public health reviews of every CS and 'near-miss' case (baby born to an infected mother who did NOT receive treatment more than 30 days before delivery and did not contract CS) commenced in 2019 to identify health system gaps/issues that could be addressed to prevent further cases.

Approach:

We reviewed reports from 21 public health reviews covering 17 CS (12 live, 5 stillbirths) and four near-miss cases from 2019 to 2023. Qualitative thematic analysis identified common themes contributing to mother-to-child transmission of syphilis.

Outcomes/Impact:

CS and near-miss cases occurred in both regional (10 cases) and metropolitan (11 cases) areas and 14 of the infants were Aboriginal.

Characteristics that were over-represented in mothers who had a baby with CS or a near miss included: identifying as Aboriginal, residing in a remote area, experiencing homelessness, alcohol use, drug use and/or other complex social issues.

Lack of access to culturally safe antenatal care and comprehensive primary healthcare was a factor frequently contributing to delayed diagnosis and treatment of syphilis in pregnancy resulting in CS in the infant. Lack of awareness of the ongoing syphilis outbreak and the importance of syphilis testing in pregnancy among health care staff contributed to a small number of cases, mostly before 2022.

Innovation and Significance:

It is important to explore alternative and co-designed models of care involving Aboriginal women, other affected communities, and key stakeholders.

Prevention of CS requires the delivery of holistic, flexible, culturally safe antenatal care by adequately resourced, knowledgeable healthcare staff.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

No disclosure of interests