

# CONGENITAL SYPHILIS IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA: IMPLEMENTATION OF A MULTIDISCIPLINARY COORDINATED RESPONSE

## Authors:

CECILIA LI<sup>1</sup>, LIZ J. WALKER<sup>2</sup>, STEVEN J. NIGRO<sup>2</sup>, HAYLEY WAREING<sup>3</sup>, ELLEN J. DONNAN<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Communicable Diseases Branch, Health Protection NSW, Australia, <sup>2</sup>Epidemiology and Data Systems Branch, Health Protection NSW, Australia, <sup>3</sup>HIV & STI Policy, Centre for Population Health, NSW, Australia

## Background:

Syphilis rates in women of reproductive age are increasing worldwide. New South Wales (NSW) reported 183 notifications of syphilis in pregnant women in 2021-2023. Syphilis in pregnancy can result in miscarriage, stillbirth or long-term development issues for the baby. From 2021-2023, NSW reported nine congenital syphilis cases.

## Approach:

An investigation into the clinical and public health management of congenital syphilis in NSW was performed through case review with analysis of medical summaries, laboratory reports, and documented case notes.

## Outcomes/Impact:

Nine singleton cases of congenital syphilis were investigated. Two cases were stillborn. All other cases experienced adverse outcomes and required treatment. The mothers were diagnosed with syphilis either during their second and third trimesters (n=3), or at birth or post-birth (n=6). Four mothers reported negative screens at their first antenatal visit (either in the first or second trimester) and acquired their infections later in pregnancy but no additional screening was done. Overarching risk factors which contributed to mother-to-child transmission included no/limited antenatal care, no engagement with healthcare services, incorrect testing for clinical symptoms, and complex social circumstances.

## Innovation and Significance:

Congenital syphilis is preventable. Root cause analyses prompted NSW Health to release the 'Syphilis in Pregnancy and Newborns' Policy Directive (PD) in October 2023. PD2023\_029 mandates universal syphilis screening of pregnant women at the first antenatal visit and again at 26-28 weeks gestation. Additional screening at 36 weeks and birth should be offered to pregnant women with an identified risk of infection. Pregnant women who have received minimal or no antenatal care must be opportunistically screened for syphilis at every engagement with a healthcare service, regardless of gestation. A locally coordinated response is paramount to ensure women are screened, linked into care, and treated to facilitate elimination of congenital syphilis in NSW.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None.