

# HYDROPS FETALIS AT 31 WEEKS: A CASE OF SEVERE CONGENITAL SYPHILIS

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## Background:

The incidence of syphilis is steadily rising in Australia, with a 351% increase in cases over the 10 years to 2022<sup>1</sup>. In this same time period, the syphilis rate among females increased six-fold, with the greatest proportional increase amongst non-Indigenous females of reproductive age. This has coincided with a dramatic increase in congenital syphilis cases, with 67 cases reported in Australia between 2020-2023<sup>1</sup>. In 2023 alone, there were 20 cases of congenital syphilis, and 10 deaths<sup>1</sup>. Congenital syphilis can result in stillbirth, prematurity, and a wide spectrum of neonatal manifestations of varying severity<sup>2</sup>.

## Case:

A 31yo primiparous, non-Indigenous female presented at 31 weeks with absent fetal movements for 24 hours. Her antenatal history was significant for chlamydia in early pregnancy (at 14 weeks gestation, treated, with negative test-of-cure) and a short cervix (stable on progesterone). Of note, her booking serology (at 6 weeks gestation), including treponema, was unremarkable.

The patient's CTG was grossly abnormal with absent variability and decelerations. A bedside MCA PSV was elevated at 1.9 MoM. The decision was made to perform a 'category 2' emergency Caesarean section.

## Case (cont.):

The neonate was born acutely unwell. His issues included

- Severe DAT negative anaemia (Hb 67) with hydrops fetalis
- Thrombocytopenia requiring transfusions
- Hepatosplenomegaly with LFT derangement
- Non-haemolytic jaundice requiring exchange transfusion

On day 5 of life, treponema serology returned positive for the neonate. The above issues are all common findings of early congenital syphilis.<sup>2</sup> Skeletal screening was performed which also revealed typical long bone changes. The neonate was treated with 14 days of benzathine penicillin.

Maternal serology was performed on old serum, and she was found to be positive for treponema only two months after her negative booking serology. She was treated for early latent syphilis with benzathine penicillin.

## References:

1. King, J et al. HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia Annual surveillance report 2023. Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney; 2023.
2. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Congenital Syphilis [Internet]. 2021.

## Discussion:

The case describes the maternal and neonatal presentation of a severe case of undiagnosed congenital syphilis. Congenital syphilis is considered a sentinel public health event, representing potential missed opportunities for prevention. This report emphasises the ongoing need for vigilance in antenatal screening, included repeated screening throughout pregnancy for higher risk women, to combat the increase in congenital syphilis cases in our community.

CONGENITAL SYPHILIS NOTIFICATIONS PER YEAR IN AUSTRALIA<sup>1</sup>

