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DALLAS--The medical expertise of Dallas County will be utilized in a new five year program to reduce infant death and disease by spotting and treating problems during and soon after pregnancy.

The "Dallas Regional Perinatal Program" has been funded for up to \$2.2 million by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in an effort to identify and treat high-risk pregnancies among the expected 25,000 births per year in the county.

Five Dallas County hospitals in which 90 per cent of those 25,000 births are expected per year will join with The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in implementing the program. They are Baylor University Medical Center, Methodist Hospital, Parkland Memorial Hospital, Presbyterian Hospital and St. Paul Hospital. In addition, more than 16 social service agencies in the county have pledged cooperation.

"The entire medical community of Dallas County is most proud of the fact this grant has been made by the Johnson Foundation," said Dr. Elgin Ware, president of the Dallas County Medical Society. "We feel the entire community will benefit from the many ramifications of the grant, including the extension of medical care and research. It's another manifestation of the significance of Dallas as a medical center."

"Through this program we hope to achieve the result that every child born has the maximum chance for developing to full physical and mental potential," remarked Dr. Charles C. Sprague, president of the UT Health Science Center at Dallas.

Regional program director for the effort will be Dr. Paul C. MacDonald, chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the medical school.

"Dallas is in a very favorable position to work toward the goal on a regional basis because of the tremendous medical and nursing expertise available in the five major hospitals and among the specialists in the county," said Dr. MacDonald.

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first add new perinatal

A "Regional Neonatal Intensive Care Unit" is to be established at Parkland Hospital as soon as construction funds are available.

Some of the problems which will be detected and managed under the program, said Dr. MacDonald, include diabetes, high blood pressure, pre-eclampsia (pregnancy-induced high blood pressure), heart and kidney disease.

"With a declining birth rate, the obstetrical population is changing," noted Dr. MacDonald. "Now, more than half the women delivering are having their first child and there are certain risk factors involved."

Statistically, the unborn child is at greater risk today, even though there have been a number of advances in care.

"We need to join our efforts to identify women at risk and offer them the ultimate in diagnostic and therapeutic methods--to ensure that each newborn will be 'wellborn'," said Dr. MacDonald.

Some of the newer methods which are being brought into use in an effort to help women bear healthy babies include sonography, the use of sound waves to monitor growth, locate soft tissue and diagnose multiple pregnancy.

Also, a method of tapping the fluid in the sac containing the unborn child--called amniocentesis--is capable of measuring lung maturation and spotting some genetic abnormalities. And, for some suspected ills, a hormone evaluation may be in order.

The Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the medical school has been instrumental in promoting perinatal screening and care.

Dr. Norman Gant of the department recently developed an extremely simple test for determining whether the prospective mother will develop pre-eclampsia. This test involves a comparison of blood pressures while the patient is on her back and on her side.

"Pre-eclampsia is unique to pregnancy," comments Dr. MacDonald, "usually it's found in women with their first child and the development of severe high blood pressure puts the fetus at great risk."

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"If, however, it is detected early enough, the woman will be able to go into the hospital and, hopefully, not develop the problem."

One of the major reasons Dallas was picked, Dr. MacDonald believes, is the strength of the research program in the already-established Green Center for Reproductive Biological Sciences.

"St. Paul Hospital is delighted to share in this grant to improve perinatal care to the citizens of Dallas," said Sister Marie Breitling, hospital president. "By offering the best medical care to the patient that is a high risk pregnancy, we also insure a better life for her baby."

Dr. Heniz Eichenwald, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Southwestern, views the grant as making "a very major contribution to the improvement of health services for infants in this area.

"Neonatal care, for an infant who is very premature, or who has other problems at birth or who is born from a high risk pregnancy, becomes a very specialized activity. This activity requires not only a well-trained neonatologist, but the availability of other health disciplines, excellent nursing and technical equipment."

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