

NEWS

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235 (214)688-3404

CONTACT: Deborah Weeter
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/243-5968

**Outreach program dedicated to lowering perinatal deaths.

DALLAS--"Those of us committed to mothers and babies will not be satisfied until perinatal mortality ceases to exist," says Nancy Young, R.N. and outreach education coordinator for the Upper Trinity Perinatal Association.

"Perinatal medicine (including the period of pregnancy, labor and delivery and care of the neonate through the first month of life) is a rapidly expanding and developing field," said Young, "and one of our main concerns is identifying high risk mothers and babies." This is done using thorough prenatal care and by careful observation and evaluation of mother and baby in the hospital.

Young is working in an office donated by Dr. Joseph Warshaw, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. Funded by a grant from the March of Dimes, she is organizing a communication and educational network throughout a 19-county area in North Central Texas that will use local expertise in perinatal medicine to voluntarily provide inservice education to outlying community hospitals.

In Dallas County alone, almost 26,000 babies are born each year. According to Dr. Charles Rosenfeld, director of the Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, and professor of Pediatrics and Ob/Gyn at the health science center, this number represents a rate that is higher than as many as 15 states. The perinatal death rate in the county during 1982 (the most current statistics from the Texas Department of Health) was 15.7 deaths per 1,000 births (more than 400 deaths). Texas has a slightly higher rate of 16.1. This means that almost 5,000 perinatal deaths occurred in Texas during 1982.

Studies show that up to half of all high risk mothers can be identified prior to delivery. Advances in science have proven that many complications in the fetus can also be diagnosed in utero, thus enhancing chances for a less complicated delivery and more healthy lives.

Based upon surveys, on-site visits and public hearings, three unofficial categories of perinatal care have been established. Level I hospitals handle only normal deliveries, level II's are capable of normal deliveries and those with very minor complications, and level III hospitals, such as Parkland Memorial Hospital, provide care for the most critically ill mothers and babies.

Ultimately, Young hopes that all 48 level I and II hospitals in the 19-county area will gain affiliation with at least one of the 10 level III facilities in the region. Other UTPA goals include helping every hospital to reach and maintain the highest standard of care possible through training, equipment, continuing education and preceptorships. This ensures not only that should a high risk delivery occur, the mother and baby can be properly stabilized before transport to a level III unit, but also that because of advanced skills and equipment they can return to their community hospital

sooner. Local experts in perinatal medicine will teach health professionals to recognize a high risk mother early so that she can deliver her baby in a level III facility to prevent problems.

"The March of Dimes," said Sarah Presley, associate director and education director of the North Central Chapter, "is an organization dedicated to giving every baby the opportunity to be born healthy."

"They are to be complimented," said Rosenfeld, "for their willingness to fund a project such as this. In addition, it is important to note that this is one of the first grants in which the funds were kept local."

Dr. Norman Gant, professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at UTHSCD, is chairman of the committee responsible for creating and governing the outreach education program. Members of the committee represent all area hospitals, and are interested in regionalizing perinatal education and care.

"The community is our responsibility," said Gant. "We owe them access to excellent care and specialty care if needed. This is a way of bringing everyone into the system so that no mother or baby falls through the cracks."

"It seems to me that it's come time for people to recognize that mothers and children play a significant part in our lives," said Gant. "A pregnant woman and a newborn represent a potential for 120 years of life. As I see it, we are the only industrialized country in the world that puts mothers and babies almost last in our priorities. I think that's a shame and a disgrace."

Warshaw said, "I support this program, but it's got to be an effort initiated in the community not just the medical school. Someone, such as Nancy, has to coordinate it, but everyone has to help make it work."

Rosenfeld emphasized that the Division of Neonatology will be involved in two major ways: helping to organize a teaching program that will reach throughout the North Texas region, and developing a way to analyze the effects of the program and objectively demonstrate its benefits.

Parkland is a major level III facility in the area and handles more high risk pregnancies and neonates than any other hospital in North Central Texas. To accommodate the growing number, Parkland recently expanded its special care nursery.

The 85-bed unit, often at 100 percent occupancy, has three designated stages of care -- intensive care, acute or intermediate care and continuing care. Rosenfeld, who is also director of Nurseries at Parkland, explained some of the unique features in the new nursery. Telephones are located at each of the intensive and intermediate care bassinets so that parents can dial in directly to the baby's bed and so that the nurse will not have to leave the bedside to answer calls. A private room is available within the unit for one or both parents to stay overnight; and a living-room-like family room is used for parent consultations. The unit employs a full-time nurse clinician who is responsible for all parent education - helping them understand and adjust to the problems of having a pre-term baby. Portable X-ray machines, a viewing room, an X-ray developer, and a pediatric radiologist are available within the unit. Part of what makes this unique is that prior to this time, explained Rosenfeld, almost all X-rays had to be developed in other areas of the hospital.

In addition to being recognized world-wide for its expertise in hypertension and pregnancy, the medical school has many pediatricians who are also specialists in other fields such as nephrology, neurosurgery, pediatric surgery and cardiology.

"Coordinating these outreach efforts is really a challenge to me but the rewards cannot be overestimated," said Young. "Pregnancy touches everyone either indirectly or directly in a personal or economic way. Loss of life and its emotional consequences as well as spiraling medical costs for critically ill babies and long-term problems can be reduced with the success of this program."

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