Zika – a wake-up call for continuous fetal monitoring

A medical ethicist from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Prof. Sylvester Chima, warned maternal health workers attending the Africa Health Exhibition/Congress in Gauteng this June to be especially vigilant in monitoring for fetal abnormalities.

The Zika outbreak in Catholic South America, which set global alarm bells ringing, with pregnant women warned against travelling there, represented the ‘perfect storm’ and highlighted medicolegal and ethical issues around termination of pregnancy. Although the chances of a Zika-infected woman arriving in South Africa (SA) were relatively slim, the now-confirmed link between the virus and fetal microcephaly emphasised the vital need for continuous fetal monitoring. Many SA doctors did not appreciate the importance of continuous monitoring (to term), with three cases of physician negligence proven in the Supreme Court after babies were born with congenital abnormalities, the latest in 2010. It can be caused by anything from fetal alcohol syndrome [FAS] to intrauterine infections or genetic abnormalities. Zika reminds us of the importance of ultrasound or magnetic resonance imaging. In several SA communities, the FAS rate is higher than the HIV/AIDS rate, and further research will indicate just how widespread the syndrome is. SA has one of the world’s highest per capita alcohol consumption rates.

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