



Neonatal outcomes. The average birth weight was 2 260 g (range 2 320 - 3 000 g). Eleven per cent of women had a low-birth-weight baby, comparing well with the Gauteng provincial rate of 18%⁴ and level 2 hospital rate of 19.2% (Kalafong Hospital Neonatal Statistics, January - December 2006 - unpublished). There was no significant association between birth of a low-birth-weight baby and the age, weight, WHO stage or parity of the mother, or her CD4 count and viral load at any stage before or during her pregnancy. There was 1 neonatal death, due to respiratory distress. Significantly, there were no reported cases of morphological abnormalities, neural tube defects, or overt developmental delay. Only 12 mothers brought their babies for their HIV polymerase chain reaction test at 6 weeks; 1 baby tested positive for HIV (8%).

Conclusion. No increased risk of adverse obstetric and neonatal outcomes was demonstrated in a small number of HIV-positive women who fell pregnant while taking efavirenz. Limitations of the study are the small number of cases, the retrospective nature of the analysis, and the limited number of first-trimester exposures. The study highlights the need for active pregnancy surveillance of this new class of medication and the urgent need to monitor neonates exposed to ARVs. We therefore propose that a formal, prospective, multi-site pregnancy registry be established, and invite interested parties to contact me for information on participation.

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Retained swab at Frere Hospital

To the Editor: The 'After Eight Debate' on SAFM on Friday 13 July 2007 concerned the *Eastern Cape Herald's* report on the unacceptable neonatal mortality rate at Frere Hospital. Most upsetting for the callers and the host was the reported incident of a retained swab after a caesarean section. The responses were often emotional, calling for immediate investigation and prosecution by the HPCSA of medical and nursing staff guilty of negligence. Unfortunately, retained swabs and instruments are an ever-present threat, especially in emergency surgery performed after normal hours in adverse circumstances.¹ Authorities participating in the show seemed eager to play up

the issue of negligence – which is the wrong response to the situation and does not take into account modern theories of human error.

Error is a human feature, and no human being has not at some point lost house keys, forgotten to turn off the stove or run out of petrol.² Such errors are minor and irritating; however, when made by someone in charge of an aeroplane or a nuclear power station, the consequences could be most significant. Human error accounts for a great deal of morbidity and mortality in health care. The Institute of Medicine report, entitled *To Err is Human*, alleged that human errors were responsible for 44 000 - 98 000 deaths annually in the USA.³ It called for a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanism behind these errors so as to facilitate the development of preventive systems. The report extrapolated on the work of psychologists who have studied human error in various settings.^{2,4,5} Two approaches to human error are the person approach and the systems approach.

The person approach blames the individual – which is emotionally more satisfying. Traditionally, medical error has been dealt with in-house by the so-called 'blame and train' approach based on a retrospective morbidity and mortality meeting. If done honestly and constructively, important messages can be learnt. However, this knowledge is not institutionalised and tends to remain with the individual. The next generation of staff may have to re-learn the lesson the hard way. In the broader community, medical error has been dealt with by medico-legal processes, again focusing on the individual, which limits closer scrutiny of systematic failures which, although difficult to detect, are significant sources of error. Adverse events are seldom the result of single acts of 'human bloody-mindedness', and health care workers function in a complex system where technology and humans interact. The 'human factors approach' looks beyond the individual and focuses on pre-existing conditions that create environments which foster the potential for error. Latent system errors – such as inadequate staffing, long working hours and inadequate supervision – underlie the errors made by staff who deliver health care. We cannot change the human condition, but we can change systems so as to prevent recognised error patterns from occurring. Mechanical approaches to this end include physical lock-outs, defence-in-depth strategy, mandatory early warning systems, and enforced clinical pathways or algorithms. It is essential that latent failures in systems are addressed as a priority, including the problems germane to most of our state health institutions, namely understaffing, ageing infrastructure, overcrowding, inadequate remuneration and lack of supervision.

Prosecuting the staff involved in the retained swab incident won't ensure that it will not happen again and may simply allow management to wriggle off the hook. We do not need to root out a few bad apples, but rather to develop a



comprehensive plan to address the underlying latent systems failures in our state hospitals. This is a daunting challenge, but it would be refreshing to hear honest commitments to putting things right, rather than the easier option of blaming individuals.

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Service, training and research into infertility in public hospitals in South Africa

To the Editor: I should like to draw attention to the current huge influx of infertile and sub-fertile couples at public sector hospitals. The ability to reproduce is a basic element of reproductive health. The current infertility rate in South Africa is 15 - 20%.¹ The total fertility rate in South Africa is 3.1 – the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa – and is declining.¹

Treatment of infertility is unavailable at the majority of public hospitals. The private sector provides world-class infertility services, inaccessible however to the majority of South Africans. Out of 8 medical schools in South Africa, only 3 practise advanced infertility management. Only 2 universities have HPCSA-recognised sub-specialists in reproductive medicine, who manage infertile couples. Among these sub-specialists, 8 are practising in the Western Cape, 3 in Gauteng and 2 in the Eastern Cape.

Interestingly, only 5 out of 13 sub-specialists are providing services at university and government hospitals; the others are in full-time private practice.

In terms of research, a total of only 22 studies were published in the area of reproductive medicine from 1996 to 2006, mainly from Stellenbosch (8) and Cape Town (7). In terms of focus, only 13 studies^{2,3} focused on investigation and treatment of infertility, implying an unavailability of management facilities. Only one hospital published treatment-related facts.

Lack of clinical research indicates lack of services and skills. The very few facilities and sub-specialists in the government and university sectors are unable to provide services to large numbers of patients, thus failing the poorer classes of South Africans. Formal sub-specialty training is neither easily accessible nor available because of the limited number of centres and recognised sub-specialists.

The time has come to give more attention to this sub-specialty, by provincial health departments, universities and the HPCSA creating more clinicians for practice in public hospitals – which 80% of our population attend. Health policy measures in the area of reproductive medicine are also a real necessity to preserve this basic reproductive right of all couples in South Africa.⁴

All references are available on request.

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