



Folic acid awareness among women of reproductive age in Cape Town

To the Editor: Neural tube defects (NTDs) are relatively common congenital abnormalities. The prevalence in South Africa typically ranges from 1 to 3.5 per 1 000 births.¹ Higher rates, 6.13 per 1 000 live births, have been recorded in rural Transkei.² Epidemiological studies have shown that periconceptual dietary supplementation with folic acid can substantially decrease the prevalence of NTD.^{3,4} The Department of Health (DOH) strongly recommends that all women of childbearing age be informed of the benefits of periconceptual folic acid supplementation.⁵

A descriptive study was undertaken to assess the awareness of folic acid supplementation among pregnant and non-pregnant women of reproductive age in Cape Town.

A sample survey was conducted among pregnant women attending Hout Bay and Retreat antenatal clinics. A second group of non-pregnant women were also interviewed at a 'well-baby' clinic at Brown's Farm, Cape Town. The interviewer obtained data from both groups using a structured questionnaire. After the survey folic acid supplementation was promoted (in English and Xhosa) with a view to influencing the women's behaviour in future pregnancies.

Table I shows descriptive results for 63 pregnant women interviewed at two antenatal clinics and a sample of 100 non-pregnant women at a 'well-baby' clinic.

Age and educational levels were similar in both groups. Among pregnant women 20.6% had heard of folic acid and only 11.1% related it to birth defects. In contrast, among non-pregnant women 18% were aware of folic acid and 10% related it to birth defects.

The results in this study reveal a lack of knowledge pertaining to folic acid and the relationship between folate deficiency and NTDs. We are concerned that much of the effort of promoting awareness may be fruitless because of the lack of knowledge of the importance of periconceptual

Table I. Characteristics of the pregnant and non-pregnant women interviewed

Variables	Pregnant women (N = 63)	Non-pregnant women (N = 100)
Age in years (mean ± SD)	26.0 ± 6.5	24.17 ± 5.6
Education level (N (%))		
Primary	11 (17.5)	12 (12)
Secondary	52 (82.5)	8 (8)
Heard of folic acid (N (%))	13 (20.6)	18 (18)
Related folic acid to birth defects (N (%))	7 (11.1)	10 (10)

SD = standard deviation.

folate supplementation among women of reproductive age. It would appear that the most effective public health intervention would be one of fortification of basic foodstuffs rather than supplementation. The national DOH is currently implementing such a programme.⁶ In conclusion, strategies to increase awareness of the importance of folic acid among women of childbearing age needs to be addressed, with emphasis on preventive measures.

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