

EDITORIAL

Drug abuse in pregnancy and effects on the newborn

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There is nowhere in the world that is not affected by the impact of illicit drug or alcohol use and young adults are central to this activity. Attempts to eradicate drugs from western societies have been unsuccessful and drugs and alcohol continue to be attractive to many young people initially in a so called recreational setting. It is the same young adults who are sexually active resulting in a number of pregnancies affected by drugs or alcohol. Those active in the care of pregnant women and their offspring, whether in the obstetric, neonatal or paediatric fields, need to be fully aware of the implications of drug and alcohol use on the well being of the mother and her children both during and after pregnancy.

The reviews in this edition of *Seminars in Fetal and Neonatal Medicine* have focussed on the spectrum of effects of drug use from before pregnancy through to the longer term outcome of children up to school age. Broadening the understanding of the effects of drugs on mother and child and providing a comprehensive health and social care service is the only way to mitigate the impact and to change the outcome.

Crome and Kumar introduce the issues of drug use in both the pregnant and non-pregnant young women. Looking at the prevalence in different societies, the effect on mortality and morbidity and address the differences in use based on cultural and religious affiliation. Pollard brings to life the importance of understanding the neuropharmacology and teratogenicity of drug and alcohol use in pregnancy and describes the underlying mechanisms that link the interactions of the drugs with gene polymorphisms, dietary deficiencies and other maternal and environmental influences which then affect the developing fetus and result in altered fetal programming. Wright and Walker in their chapter on the management of drug using women in pregnancy and labour, and Macrory and Boyd in their chapter on developing primary and secondary services for drug and alcohol dependent women focus on practical aspects of the care to be delivered to pregnant women and describe differences between the approach in a number of countries.

Kuschel, Kumpfer and Shankaran focus on the care for the newborn child and the family as the child grows over the first few years. A clear strategy for the care of the newborn infant focussing on opiate withdrawal is given by Carl Kuschel who highlights the needs to assess not only the infant but also parenting abilities, social support and surveillance for transmission of viral infection. Kumpfer builds on the importance of parenting skills for the adequate development of children born to drug using mothers. He looks at the social, governmental and other interventions that can be used to support and strengthen the family unit and in so doing to reduce the risks of delinquency, behavioural abnormalities and subsequent drug use by the child. Finally Shankaran and colleagues document the wide ranging impact of drug use on childhood outcome.

All the contributors recognise the importance of prevention programmes before or in the early stages of pregnancy to reduce the impact of drugs on the developing and vulnerable fetus but recognise that this approach can never be completely successful. There will always be the need to address the complex issues of illicit drug and alcohol use and to recognise that both social and health interventions are needed to mitigate the effects as much as possible.

We are indebted to all the contributors for agreeing to share their expertise in their particular areas and for drawing together the breadth of the research knowledge and practice into a comprehensive document. The world of illicit drug use is ever changing and developing and there is always more to learn.

