Syphilis resurgence puts pregnant women and their babies at risk

Syphilis is re-emerging as a common sexually transmitted infection in many developing economies, putting pregnant women and their babies at risk.

A study published today in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization highlights a lack of syphilis testing of pregnant women in rural communities of southern China, where this largely forgotten infection has seen a recent resurgence.

Syphilis infection in pregnant women can cause fetal and infant deaths, and irreversible birth defects including blindness and brain damage. But, if diagnosed early, the infection can be treated effectively with penicillin.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that almost 2 million pregnant women worldwide are infected with syphilis every year and half of these women transmit the infection to their baby if they are not treated. The disease has been around for many centuries but some countries are experiencing a resurgence in cases, particularly among female sex workers and men who have sex with men. In China, there were almost 300 000 reported cases of syphilis in 2008, a tenfold increase on the previous decade.
Mother-to-child syphilis transmission is an important public health concern in areas with high incidence of syphilis,” says Dr Li-Gang Yang, from the Guangdong Provincial Center for Sexually Transmitted Infection Control & Prevention. “Our study of almost 500 000 pregnant women in Guangdong Province found that more than 40% of pregnant women in poor areas were missing out on a syphilis test, in most cases because health clinics lack testing facilities.”

“Since we did the study in 2008, the Chinese government has responded to this problem by integrating rapid tests into the national programme for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, syphilis and hepatitis B in China,” says another author of the study, Rosanna Peeling of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. “This timely translation of evidence to policy can serve as a model for other countries.”

WHO is working with China and other countries to integrate syphilis, HIV and hepatitis B control efforts into routine pregnancy care. Simple, cost-effective screening for syphilis of all pregnant women early in pregnancy and treatment of infected women could eliminate congenital syphilis.

Read the paper here: http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/89/11-089813.pdf

For more information on WHO’s efforts to eliminate congenital syphilis: http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/rtis/syphilis/en/index.html

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  • Bring back iodized salt in Viet Nam
  • The rising influence of social media on public health
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