

A-11: Knowledge, practice and attitudes of pregnant women on prevention of neural tube defects by periconceptual folic acid vitamin treatment

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Pregnant women's knowledge, practice and attitudes on folate containing foods, neural tube defects and use of folic acid to prevent neural tube defects was studied.

This study was carried out at the antenatal clinic of De Soysa Hospital for Women, between 1st January 1997 and 1st July 1997. One hundred and twelve women were randomly selected and interviewed using a pretested questionnaire at the first antenatal visit. From the first 7 numbers, a random number was selected from a table of random numbers. Then every 7th number was selected from the pregnant mothers register for the study. This was repeated at each clinic visit till the sample was completed. Twelve women were excluded because of language difficulty. The questionnaire included information about folic acid, folate containing foods, folic acid and neural tube defects, timing and duration of folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects and source of their knowledge and their level of education and basic characteristics.

One hundred women were available for final analysis. Their age ranged from 18-40 years (median 30) and the time of gestation ranged from 10 to 12 weeks (median 16). Seventy two were primiparous and 28 were multiparous. Only 10 had education level below grade 10 and 80 had up to advanced level and the rest had university education.

Eighty eight women did not know the answers for 5 main questions regarding folic acid supplementation and neural tube defects. Only 12 women answered all the questions. All women who answered the questions knew what is folic acid, prevention of neural tube defects by periconceptual supplementation. Out of these 12, one was a housewife who got this information through newspapers. The other 11 were doctors (2), nurses (8) and a university lecturer. None of the study group took periconceptual folic acid supplements or intentionally increased folate containing foods. All of them said if they were educated they would have taken folic acid periconceptually and up to first twelve weeks of pregnancy.

Pregnant women's knowledge and practice on prevention of neural tube defects by folic acid supplementation was very poor. Their attitudes and practice can be improved by proper education. The desire for a healthy infant is an incredibly strong impetus to complying with medicines. We have the scientific evidence available now. It is a matter of education of healthcare professionals, midwives and the potentially child bearing public and the provision of adequate easily available sources of folic acid. In 1996 in the Kandy General Hospital, there were 0.3% cases of neural tube defects out of 9000 births. These could have been prevented if all women who were planning pregnancy were given 0.4 mg of folic acid prior to pregnancy. It is advisable that all midwives and health care professionals educate the general public regarding this important preventive medical treatment.