
Today's Topic: Race on to save babies' lives Infant mortality demands all-out effort

Our View

Could it be that the cliché holds true: Unless it happens to you, you just don't feel it? Except that it's babies dying that they're talking about. Far too many babies.

Readers of *The Tennessean's* three-day series, "Gone Too Soon," know that in Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, more infants die than in any other part of the country.

And the causes of death are virtually all preventable — the effects of unhealthy habits and lifestyles of the mother that can lead to birth defects. That is not to lay the blame for this on any individuals, least of all the mothers, many of whom are single parents, and living in poverty.



RN Lacey Wilkins weighs and measures 5-month-old Kayden Stuts. Stuts weighed 4 pounds when he was born prematurely. Wilkins works with Nurses for Newborns, a safety-net group that provides in-home visits for at-risk families.

SHELLEY MAYS / THE TENNESSEAN

The problem is much bigger than that. It's woven into the fabric of our Southern culture. A new United Health Foundation report compiled the statistics: Nine of 1,000 babies born alive in Tennessee die before their first birthday, or more than 700 babies a year. That rate is considerably higher than that of most developed nations. The report based its findings on 20 criteria for causes of unhealthy babies, and they include the mothers' smoking, obesity and low high school graduation rates, as well as conditions of the mother such as diabetes and sexually transmitted diseases.

The common thread, however, is poverty. Poverty prevents many expectant mothers from affording healthier foods that can help control obesity and diabetes. Poverty contributes to increased high school dropout rates, and teens who are less informed are more likely to smoke, drink, do drugs or practice unsafe sex.

The high rates are not all about lifestyle decisions, though. Deaths of babies of African-American

mothers are disproportionately high; in Memphis, their rate is more than double that of the Tennessee population as a whole. Besides the fact that more African-Americans live in poverty, some doctors think African-American mothers may experience more stress due to racism and higher crime rates in mostly black neighborhoods. Stress can spur preterm labor and lower resistance to deadly infections. And some doctors believe there may be a genetic predisposition to preterm labor among African-American women.

Research under way at Meharry and other medical centers is contributing to answers to these troubling questions. But while private and government grants are going toward prenatal research, experts agree that it's not enough, given the sheer number of pregnancies in the population and the range of factors in infant deaths. Also, young mothers have fewer advocates for increased research funding than cancer or heart disease patients.

Infant deaths must be attacked on all fronts: medically, socially, culturally. Expectant mothers, and especially single women, need access to information about how to take better care of themselves, not only from doctors but from other moms.

The state's Centering Pregnancy programs offer everything from nutrition and child-care advice to finding better jobs in a support-group setting, and its Community Voice program in Memphis teaches expectant mothers about factors that increase infant mortality.

Few who had the choice would opt to go through a pregnancy alone, having to make decisions without anyone's advice. These groups could make a difference, one mother-to-be, and one baby, at a time.