Adolescent Pregnancies: Maternal and Fetal Complications In Yaounde University Hospitals

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Abstract

Introduction: Childhood pregnancies pose problems in their follow-up and care. We described complications observed in adolescent pregnancies in four reference hospitals in Yaoundé.

Methodology: This cross-sectional descriptive study took place from January 1 to December 31 2011 at the Yaoundé Central Hospital, the Yaoundé General Hospital, the Yaoundé Gynae-Obstetric and Pediatric Hospital and the Yaounde University Hospital Centre. We studied the socio-demographic and clinical characteristics as well as the prognosis of 340 adolescent pregnancies. The data were collected from their medical records and analyzed using the SPSS 18.0 software.

Results: We registered 9287 deliveries of which 1247 were by teenagers, giving a proportion of 13.42% (1247/9287). Among them, 27.2% (340/1247) had complications and 26.2% (89/340) of the latter were seropositive for HIV. Adolescents aged 15 to 17 outnumbered the rest (47%, 160/340). The educational level was often primary (39.7%, 135/340) and secondary (38.2%, 130/340). More than half of teenage girls were dropping out of school (56.8%, 183/340). The pregnancy-related complications encountered in our patients included: anaemia (77.6%, 264/340), threatened abortion (24.4%, 83/340), preterm labour (20.6%, 70/340) and hypertensive diseases (19.4%, 66/340). As regards postpartum complications, 87.4% (297/340) of our patients developed postpartum haemorrhage, 22.6% (77/340) presented with endometritis and 11.2% (38/340) developed eclampsia. Neonatal asphyxia accounted for 18.2% (62/340) of the complications. The maternal mortality rate was 240 / 100.000 live births and the perinatal mortality rate was 91/1000 births.

Conclusion: Early pregnancies are associated with high morbidity and high maternal and neonatal mortality. There is a real need for family life education in schools and sexuality education at home.

Keywords: adolescent, adolescent delivery, adolescent pregnancy, pregnancy complications, Yaoundé

Introduction

Adolescent sexuality can lead to unpredictable and serious consequences. Sexual intercourse exposes them to sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Aside being fearsome, these could evolve leading to consequences that could definitely affect their lives. According to the WHO, 11% of the world’s births in 2008 were attributable to adolescent girls and 95 per cent of childbirths occurred in developing countries [1]. Authors around the world have found prevalence between 4% and 26% [2-5]. In Cameroon, the prevalence varies per region, between 8.7% and 14.23%. Adolescent pregnancies may end in clandestine abortions. However, those that lead to childbirth can cause problems before, during and after childbirth. [6-10].

The problems posed by teenage pregnancies are not specific to them, but they occur in a particular context. Single-parenthood and financial constraints can be discussed as associated factors. Similarly, on the biological level, the immaturity of the adolescent body predisposes them to a greater frequency of complications and severity when these occur. Althabe et al associate the risks incurred by the pregnant teenager more with this biological immaturity than
with the socio-economic factors and the care given to her before and during childbirth.

During pregnancy, adolescents have a high incidence of hypertensive diseases, anemia, gestational diabetes, complications of childbirth, and increased maternal and fetal mortality [2, 11]. Some authors describe a higher incidence of low birth weight, stillbirth and fetal distress [6, 7, 12, 13]. Neonatal complications and infant mortality are more frequent [12, 14].

The circumstances surrounding the discovery of these pregnancies are often difficult and especially marked by the avoidance of those around these teenagers [15]. This makes it difficult to monitor pregnancy optimally. Early management of these pregnancies could avert adverse situations (hypertensive diseases, anaemia and complications of childbirth...) if pregnancy monitoring was early and regular. Given the prevalence of adolescent pregnancies in our environment, this study investigated the incidence of maternal and fetal complications, and further analyzed the epidemiological and clinical profile of adolescents with these complications.

**Methods**

We carried out a descriptive cross-sectional study that took place over a period of 12 months, from January 1 to December 31 2011, in the maternity wards of the 4 university teaching hospitals in the city of Yaoundé, namely: Yaoundé Central Hospital, Yaoundé General Hospital, Yaoundé Gynaeco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital and the Yaoundé University Centre Hospital.

We retained all of the 10- to 19-year-old parturients followed-up during the study period, and who had a pregnancy termination of 28 weeks and above and any complication during pregnancy or during and after childbirth. After giving birth and agreeing to participate in the study with the informed consent of the adults accompanying them, we interviewed the adolescent girls and a pre-established data collection sheet was filled. Subsequently, their medical records were consulted in order to supplement the information sought. The sampling was consecutive and comprehensive throughout the study period.

The variables studied included: age, level of education, school status (dropout), HIV status of the patient, pathologies presented during pregnancy, maternal complications during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum, maternal outcome after childbirth, fetal and newborn complications, newborn outcome, as well as the causes of maternal and neonatal death where appropriate. The data was analyzed using the SPSS software version 18. The results were presented in the form of frequency, tables and figures. We calculated the maternal mortality ratio and the perinatal mortality ratio.

**Results**

During the study period, there were 9287 deliveries in all four hospitals. Among these deliveries, 1247 occurred among adolescent girls giving a proportion of 13.42% (1247/9287). Among these adolescents, 27.2% (340/1247) had complications. The maternal mortality ratio was 240/100000 and the perinatal mortality ratio was 91/10000.

**Sociodemographic characteristics of patients**

The socio-demographic characteristics of the adolescent girls are described in (Table 1).

| Table 1: Adolescent socio-demographic characteristics (N=340) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **Variables**               | **Numbers (n)** | **Frequency (%)** |
| **Age**                     |                |                  |
| ≤ 15                        | 94             | 27.7             |
| [15-17]                     | 160            | 47.0             |
| ≥17                         | 86             | 25.3             |
| **Marital status**          |                |                  |
| single                      | 183            | 53.8             |
| married                     | 152            | 44.7             |
| divorced                    | 4              | 1.2              |
| Widow                       | 1              | 0.3              |
| **Religion**                |                |                  |
| Christian                   | 161            | 47.3             |
| Muslim                      | 142            | 41.8             |
| animist                     | 37             | 10.9             |
| **Educational level**       |                |                  |
| Never been to school        | 56             | 16.5             |
| Primary school              | 135            | 39.7             |
| Secondary school            | 130            | 38.2             |
| Higher education            | 19             | 5.6              |
| **School drop out**         |                |                  |
| Yes                         | 183            | 56.8             |
| No                          | 147            | 43.2             |

The average age of the adolescent girls was 15.6 years ± 2.1 with extremes of 10 years and 19 years. Adolescents in the age group [15-17] were the most represented with 47% (160/340) of the cases. Single adolescents accounted for 53.8% (183/340) of the cases. Regarding schooling for adolescents, 16.5% (56/340) had never attended school, 39.7% (135/340) had a primary education level and 38.2% (130/340) had a secondary education. Nevertheless, 56.8% (183/340) of them were school dropouts (Figure 1).

**Clinical characteristics of adolescent girls**

The clinical data of patients with complications are presented in (Table 2). HIV-positive adolescents accounted for 26.2% (89/340) of the cases. A significant proportion of adolescent girls (40.9%, 139/340) were referred. Adolescent girls were often primiparous (56.5%, 192/340). Most of these adolescents had less than 4 prenatal consultations (64.7%, 220/340) while 10.3% did not access antenatal care. The Caesarean section rate was very high at 26.8% (91/140).

*Figure 1: Distribution of adolescents with respect to the notion of school dropout (N=284)*
Table II: Adolescent clinical data (N=340)

| Variables       | Numbers (n) | Frequency (%) |
|-----------------|-------------|---------------|
| HIV positive    | 89          | 26.2          |
| Referred        |             |               |
| Yes             | 139         | 40.9          |
| No              | 201         | 59.1          |
| Parity          |             |               |
| P0              | 60          | 17.6          |
| P1              | 192         | 56.5          |
| P2 - 4          | 72          | 21.2          |
| P>4             | 16          | 4.7           |
| Gestational age at delivery | |               |
| < 37 Weeks      | 60          | 17.6          |
| ≥ 37 weeks      | 280         | 82.4          |
| Number of ANC consultations | |               |
| None            | 35          | 10.3          |
| 1 - 3           | 185         | 54.4          |
| ≥ 4             | 120         | 35.3          |
| Delivery mode   |             |               |
| Normal per-vaginam | 160      | 47.0          |
| Instrumental delivery | 89      | 26.2          |
| Caesarean section | 91        | 26.8          |

Complications of teenage pregnancy

The complications encountered during adolescent pregnancy are described in (Table 3). Anemia was the most frequent complication at 77.6% (264/340) followed by threatened abortion (24.4%; 83/340), preterm labor (20.6%; 70/340), hypertensive diseases (19.4%, 66/340) and third trimester hemorrhage (16.5%, 56/340). Complications encountered during childbirth and postpartum are shown in (Table 4). These complications were dominated by postpartum hemorrhage (87.4% (297/340), endometritis (22.6%, 77/340) and eclampsia (11.2%, 38/340). Low birth weight was the most prevalent fetal complication (35%, 119/340) followed by neonatal asphyxia (12.2%, 62/340).

Table 3: Complications encountered during the pregnancy (N=340)

| Variables                  | Numbers (n) | Frequency (%) |
|----------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Anemia                     | 264         | 77.6          |
| Threatened abortion        | 83          | 24.4          |
| Preterm labor              | 70          | 20.6          |
| Hypertensive diseases in pregnancy | 66      | 19.4          |
| 3rd trimester bleeding     | 56          | 16.5          |
| IUFD                       | 8           | 7.4           |

Figure 2: Aetiology of post-partum haemorrhage in adolescent girls (N=297)

Figure 3: Causes of perinatal death (N=21)

Discussion

Teenage pregnancy results in anxiety for the patient, her entourage and the medical staff because the risks of complications for the mother and for the fetus are real. Unfortunately, the frequency of adolescent pregnancies is high and deliveries are frequent. The prevalence of teenage births varies across countries and regions. We found a prevalence of 13.42% in the four university teaching hospitals in Yaoundé; a student city in which teenage girls have access to information about the risks associated with early sexuality. Egbe et al. found a similar prevalence in Buea, another student city in Cameroon in 2015 [8]. But Tebeu et al. found a higher prevalence of 26.54% in Maroua, in northern Cameroon,
a region where adolescent marriages are common [16]. This is partly because it is a predominantly Muslim city, but also due to the cultural habits of the populations in this region.

Early marriages are frequent with low levels of scolarisation for the girl child. The prevalence that we found in our study was close to that which other authors have described elsewhere in the literature [4, 5]. We found that 27.2% of teenage girls had complications related to their pregnancy. Owono et al. in Cameroon found a small proportion of adolescents (6.1%) among women admitted to the intensive care unit for obstetric complications [17]. Indeed, adolescent pregnancy is associated with a higher incidence of perinatal complications than maternal complications, which could justify this difference in results [5, 18].

Pregnancy often occurs between 16 and 19 years of age [1]. The average age of adolescents with complications in our study was 15.6 years. Authors before us in Cameroon found that maternal age is a determining factor in the occurrence of complications [8,12]. Pregnant teenagers are often illiterate [19]. Education protects against early pregnancy [1]. Most of the adolescent girls in our study were either dropping out of school or never attended school. Once pregnant, adolescents are often forced to drop out of school [20]. The level of education and especially the school environment could enable the girl better understand the problems related to early sexuality, as well as the messages intended for her and above all to shelter her from the marriage proposals of her entourage.

Adolescent girls with pregnancy complications in our study were often referred to other health facilities. The precariousness in which they live (single parenthood, financial constraints) means they cannot afford follow-up in health facilities with qualified staff. The girls are therefore obliged to seek assistance from more qualified staff when unfortunately, the complications arise.

The complications that we have found are similar to those described in the literature. Anemia was the most common determinant during pregnancy. Many authors have found a high frequency of anemia in adolescent pregnancies [3,19]. The poor management of malaria during pregnancy is a major determinant for anemia in pregnancy in our environment [19]. The poor follow-up of pregnancy leads to the lack of anti-anaemic and anti-malarial prophylaxis.

The majority of adolescent girls (64.7%) did not meet the required number of prenatal consultations according to national guidelines. Nayama et al in Niger found that 28.2% of adolescent girls had no antenatal consultations, compared with 10.3% in our study [21]. The poor follow-up of pregnancy begins with a late onset of prenatal consultations [18, 19]. Consultations begin late because of ignorance, fear of consequences, stigma or limited access to care [15]. According to Taghizadeh et al, there is a relationship between the perception of risk of complications and maternal age [22]. Prenatal consultations will help to improve the perception of risk during pregnancy.

As with other authors preterm births were frequent in our study, which would also explain a higher incidence of low-birth weight babies [5, 13, 14]. On the one hand, this could be explained by a high frequency of sexually transmitted infections in adolescent girls. Hokororo in Tanzania found that half of pregnant teenagers had sexually transmitted infections [23]. Adolescent girls tend to have multiple partners and unprotected sex [1, 24]. We found a higher prevalence of HIV infection than in the general population. On the other hand, some authors explain the higher frequency of low-birth weight babies by evoking the immaturity of the cervico-uterine blood circulation that initiates the stimulation of prostaglandin secretion, leading to preterm labor [25].

The rate of caesarean section in our study was 26.8%, a rate comparable to that of Wang et al [18]. This rate is higher than the national average and those found by other authors [26]. The high caesarean section rate in our study could be because deliveries took place in hospitals of last resort where adolescent girls were referred to for pathological pregnancies or dystocia. Other reasons include; macrosomia associated with an immature pelvis and the susceptibility of health care providers or even parents. Most of teenagers in our study delivered vaginally as in other studies [3, 27].

Complications during childbirth and postpartum were dominated by postpartum hemorrhage and endometritis. The fact that adolescents are often referred from other health facilities exposes them to prolonged labor, which is a risk factor for genital bleeding and endometritis. Moreover, the relative immaturity of the tissues in adolescent may predispose them to tears of the genital tract. Like many other authors we found that adolescent girls often presented with hypertensive diseases of pregnancy. While the cause is often unknown, hypertensive diseases occur often in extreme ages or during the first pregnancy [2, 12].

Pregnancy in adolescents is associated with neonatal and foetal complications. We found a high perinatal death rate that could be related to the high frequency of preterm deliveries, Low birth weight babies and neonatal asphyxia, as previously described by Egbe et al in our environment [8]. However, there were some limitations to this study. First, we undertook our study in health facilities were most pregnancy complications are addressed, hence the risk of overestimating the frequency of complications of teenage pregnancies. In addition, adolescent girls with complications after discharge from hospital were not counted hence the risk of bias.

Conclusion
Adolescent pregnancies are associated with complications. Unmet family planning, early sexuality, unwanted pregnancies and high costs for reproductive health issues are contributory factors. Strengthening access to family planning services may help to reduce maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality among adolescents.

Acknowledgments
The authors wish to acknowledge the administrative staff of the four university teaching hospitals: Yaoundé Central Hospital, Yaoundé General Hospital, Yaoundé Gynaeco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital and the Yaoundé University Centre Hospital, who allowed us to carry out the study at their institution. This study received no grants from any funding agency be it public, commercial, or non-profit organization.

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