The fight to save babies continues

By Jennifer Portman
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Six years after the problem of infant deaths, particularly those of black babies, became a community focus in Leon County, efforts to combat the problem continue with new initiatives and a broader array of active partners.

Two key factors known to reduce the risk of babies dying before their first birthday are getting special emphasis this year: preconception health and breastfeeding.

A preconception health conference was held in January that brought together more than 70 health care professionals to discuss new and innovative ways to engage women and their partners to plan in advance for pregnancy. And in what's been hailed a major step forward, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, where most of the area's babies are born, is making a concerted effort to encourage breastfeeding and achieve the prestigious designation of a “Baby-Friendly Hospital.”

“We are in a good place as far as momentum goes,” said Dr. Joedrecka Brown, an associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Rural Health at Florida State's College of Medicine. “There is a lot of energy.”

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The numbers

Those working to reduce the county’s infant death rate and eliminate an intransigent racial disparity in birth outcomes were dealt a blow last summer when statistics from the Florida Department of Health showed a spike in the number of babies who died in 2012. The increase of infant deaths in the county — a total of 28 compared to 18 in 2011 — came after the death rate had been declining for three of the last five years and had reached its lowest level since 1996.

The increase, attributed to a sharp rise in the number of tiny, preterm babies, drove the county’s overall infant mortality rate to 9.3 per 1,000 live births, a nearly 60 percent increase from 2011. Nineteen of the 28 babies were black, which sent the black infant death rate soaring to 15.7 per 1,000 live births, three times that of white babies for that year.

Provisional numbers for 2013, however, indicate the 2012 surge in deaths may have been an anomaly. Last year, the unofficial health department data shows 16 babies died in Leon County. Eight of the infants were white and eight were black. No infant death rate for 2013 yet has been calculated, but it is likely to be even lower than 2011, when it was 5.9 per 1,000 live births, lower than the state average.

Public health officials warn against reading too much into single-year rates. Rather, they look at three-year rolling rates that illustrate trends. For the many groups involved in the effort to improve infant and maternal health — including Capital Area Healthy Start Coalition, Whole Child Leon, the Leon County Health Department, Brethren, The March of Dimes, TMH, Florida State’s College of Medicine, physicians, nurses, health care professionals and others — the work continues to find ways to stop babies from dying.

Healthy before pregnancy

Every month, the Capital Area Healthy Start Coalition’s Fetal and Infant Mortality Review team meets to review the area’s recent infant deaths. Again and again, members see the same problems.

“Education prior to pregnancy continues to come up at each meeting,” said Kristy Goldwire, executive director of the Capital Area Healthy Start Coalition. “Preconception health continues to be an issue identified.”

The wide recognition that good general health before pregnancy is a key factor in improving birth outcomes was at the heart of January’s preconception health conference, held at the College of Medicine. Coordinated by Healthy Start, Whole Child Leon and the Leon County Health Department and sponsored by TMH, the event brought together 66 doctors and other health care professionals, who heard presentations from 11 experts.

Goldwire said one of the ideas that came out of the conference was the need for women and their families to have reproductive health plans that help guide their health care and decisions before and during pregnancy. Ideally, primary care physicians and ob-gyns would help patients fashion tangible plans a year or two before a woman decides to become pregnant.

FSU’s Brown, who has become a key player in the area’s effort to reduce infant deaths since joining the college faculty two years ago, also is working on a community-based research project to find out what black women in Leon and Gadsden counties think about infant mortality and what they see as the most pressing problems.

While maternal and infant health care professionals know what the medical literature and research shows are risk factors, Brown said, “We still aren’t making a dent, and we need to be making a dent.” The results of the research project, expected to be completed by summer, may provide valuable insights.

“I am so much more convinced, if we can address these social determinants (the circumstances in which people are born into and live, such as poverty) and make it a healthier community, we can make a difference in reducing infant mortality,” Brown said. “It’s place, not race. Your zip code determines more about your long-term health than anything else.”

Breastfeeding matters

Dr. Ed Holifield, whose tenacity brought the problem of infant mortality to the community’s attention and demanded action, said one of the most significant recent developments is TMH’s decision to become a “Baby-Friendly” hospital.

The United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Health Organization established the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative in 1991 to encourage and recognize hospitals that offer a high level of care for breastfeeding. Healthcare experts and scientists agree breastfeeding is the best way to feed babies and breast milk is known to reduce the risk of infant death and other chronic illnesses and diseases in children and their mothers.

“Connie giving that Powerpoint was the icing on the cake,” Holifield said. “That shows TMH has really gotten on board.”

The League’s Kathy Winn said members were so impressed with the presentation, the group is looking for ways it can help promote breastfeeding in the community.

“We want to be involved,” Winn said.

Brown and others say such enthusiasm and dedication from all sectors of the community is what will be required to see fewer babies die.

“It takes everybody,” she said.