

'It just happens': Science and medicine have their limits in preventing infant mortality

Written by Jennifer Portman Democrat senior writer
Apr. 21

tallahassee.com



[Purchase Image Zoom](#)

Dr. Roderick Hume is a maternal fetal medicine specialist and reproductive geneticist with Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare. He troubleshoots potential poor birth outcomes. / Glenn Beil

About this series

“Healthy Babies” is a month-long effort by the Tallahassee Democrat intended to enlighten the community about efforts to reduce infant deaths and promote positive birth outcomes. Every Wednesday of the month will feature in-depth articles with an accompanying video at Tallahassee.com. Additionally, video vignettes featuring survivors of preterm birth will be posted each Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. Tips for having healthy babies also will be published in TLH four days a week. The Democrat will

post a long-form video documentary summing up the series on Sunday, April 30.

Coming up in the

Democrat

and Tallahassee.com:

April 24 – Where to go from here?

Dr. Roderick Hume is a kind of dangerous-birth detective. As a maternal fetal medicine specialist and reproductive geneticist with Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare, he uses ultrasounds and genetic testing to find clues that may put a baby at risk of becoming another sad addition to the infant mortality rate.

In the last five years, Hume is credited with anticipating problems and helping to see that fewer babies die. While about one in 10 infants end up spending time in the neonatal intensive care unit, such early warnings mean adequate care can accompany potentially complicated deliveries.

But Hume is the first to say that science and medicine have their limits.

“Mother nature is complicated and unpredictable,” he said. “Most of the stuff that goes wrong, it’s nobody’s fault, it just happens.”

When things go wrong

That was the case for two of Hume’s patients. Ashley Prosser’s first pregnancy in 2011 ended in the middle of the 25th week with a still birth of her daughter Katherine Grace. At the end of her second trimester in December, Ruth Mason developed a rapid rise in blood pressure known as preeclampsia and a related rare condition called HELLP syndrome, which forced her to have an emergency C-section to save her life and that of her son. When Stephen was delivered he weighted just 1 pound 11.5 ounces.

Both women were healthy. They were in good shape, ate right and saw their doctors regularly. They did everything right. Why they had bad outcomes remains a mystery.

“Most bad things happen to people who aren’t knowingly at risk,” Hume said.

Thanks to medical advances, the work of their health care teams and support from family and friends, both women have thriving babies today. After being assured by Hume there was no reason genetically or otherwise that she could not have a healthy baby, Prosser, a sixth-grade teacher, and her husband Nate, who co-owns Tallahassee Nurseries, tried again. After lots of peace-of-mind ultrasounds and heart-beat checks, Emma Rose was born last year.

“It really makes you appreciate everything,” Ashley Prosser said.

Ruth Mason, the music teacher at Holy Comforter Episcopal School and her husband David, owner of Mason’s School of Music, spent 96 long, tough, roller coaster days in NICUs. But on April 1, Stephen finally made it to his nursery at home, where he grows stronger by the day.

“He is our little miracle,” Ruth Mason said.

Good choices still matter

Experts, however, warn the uncertainty that can surround birth outcomes is no excuse for women to be cavalier about their health.

“There are so many factors at play, it makes it hard to figure out and hard to fix, but it’s not a hopeless situation,” said Dr. Joedrecka Brown, an associate professor with the Department of Family Medicine and Rural Health in Florida State’s College of Medicine. “We should focus on what we can do.”

Hume said that boils down to “living like your mother told you you should” — including eating right, exercise and regular doctor visits. Smoking, drinking, obesity and poor general health are all proven risk factors for prematurity and other complications that can lead to infant death.

Taking prenatal multivitamins with folic acid has been shown to reduce the risk of birth defects, preterm birth and even autism in children. Such vitamins are cheap and easily purchased at the corner drug store or supermarket.

Brown said doctors need to use every encounter with a woman to talk about the importance of good health and the problems that can come from bad behaviors.

“It starts early, early on,” she said.

Personal responsibility

Because about half of all pregnancies are unplanned, it is critical that women of child-bearing age be in good health before they become moms, experts agree.

“Like anything in medicine, prevention is key,” said Dr. Tanya Evers of TMH’s primary care residency program. “Although we can’t prevent every poor outcome, having early intervention can hopefully minimize the risk for mother and baby.”

Medical professionals and social service providers say the resources for prenatal and preconception health care exist in the community and programs are available to help moms and future moms increase their chances of having a healthy babies.

The success of those efforts, however, come down in many cases to individual choice.

“You can’t ever get away from some degree of personal responsibility on the part of the families that are having the children,” said TMH’s Dr. Lisa Jernigan.

“People have expected us to have a magic wand,” she added, “and we don’t have one, just so they know.”

Hume said a motivated, healthy woman has a better chance of having a healthy baby today than she did 30 years

ago, but the same intransigent problems still impact birth outcomes.

“If you aren’t motivated to stop smoking you won’t,” he said. “The motivation has to come from them, and not someone else.”