

Teenage Pregnancy: The Unmet Needs of Female Adolescents in Uganda

Authors : M. Weller Jones, J. Moffat, J. Taylor, J. Hartland, M. Natarajan

Abstract : Background: Uganda's teenage pregnancy rate remains a significant problem for female and maternal health in the country. Teenage pregnancy is linked to higher rates of maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity, including preterm labour, obstructed labour, vesicovaginal fistulae, infections, and maternal mental health morbidity. In 2015, the National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy was launched in Uganda. Research is needed so that the interventions in this Strategy can be effectively applied at a local level. This study at Kitovu and Villa Maria Hospitals, two local community hospitals near Masaka, Uganda, aimed to measure change in the local teenage pregnancy rate over the past 5 years; and to explore the awareness and attitudes of teenagers and healthcare professionals towards 1) teenage pregnancy and, 2) the challenges female adolescents still currently face. Method: Teenage delivery rate, type of delivery, incidence of complications in labour and neonatal and maternal outcomes were collected from the labour ward admission books, at both hospitals, for a six month time period in 2011 and 2016. At Kitovu Hospital, qualitative data regarding the experience of, and attitudes towards teenage pregnancy was collected from interviews conducted with 12 maternity staff members and with eight female teenagers, aged 16-19, who were pregnant or post-partum. Results: The proportion of total births to teenage mothers fell from 14% in 2011 to 7% in 2016 (Kitovu), but it remains higher in rural locations (19%, Villa Maria). Beliefs about exacerbating factors included: poor access to contraception; misconceptions that contraception is damaging to women's health; failing sex education in schools; and poor awareness of national campaigns to reduce teenage pregnancy. Staff felt that the best way to tackle teenage pregnancy was to improve sex education in schools and to sensitise families to these issues. Six of the eight teenagers wanted more frequent sex education and easier, cheap access to contraception. Only one teenager saw positive consequences stating that teenage pregnancy would 'avoid operations later in life.' Discussion: Teenage pregnancy is a recognised problem and strategies in the Masaka region should focus on improving sex education in schools and initiating an organisation that educates and supplies free contraception to teenagers.

Keywords : adolescents, attitudes, teenage pregnancy, Uganda

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