**Does place and attendance at birth improve early neonatal mortality? Secondary analysis of nine Demographic and Health Surveys**

**Running title: Early neonatal mortality by place and attendance at birth**

**Authors**: Bellizzi S1, Sobel HL1, Mathai M2, Temmerman M3

1World Health Organization, Western Pacific Regional Office, PO Box 2932 (United

Nations Avenue), 1000 Manila, Philippines

2Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health, World Health

Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

3Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Address for correspondence to Howard Sobel, WHO Western Pacific Regional Office,

PO Box 2932 (United Nations Avenue), 1000 Manila, Philippines. Tel: +63-2-528-9868;

Fax: +63-2-526-0279; E-mail: sobelh@wpro.who.int

**Abstract:**

**Objectives:** To determine the relation between place and skilled birth attendance at birth and early neonatal mortality.

**Design:** Retrospective analysis using data from Demographic and Health Surveys on obstetric complications.

**Setting:** 9 low and middle income countries between 2006 and 2013.

**Population:** 71 758 women aged 15-49 years.

**Methods:** A secondary analysis was carried out to investigate the occurrence and effect of obstetric complications on early neonatal mortality and association with place and attendance at birth. Obstetric complications studied were prolonged labour, puerperal infection and eclampsia.

**Main outcome measures:** Association between early neonatal mortality and place and attendance at birth, unadjusted and adjusted for presence of severe obstetric complications.

**Results:** Thirty five percent of all births were at home: 70% of these were without skilled attendamts. Obstetric complications were reported in 17079 women: 82% of these women gave birth in health facilities. Overall no association was observed between place of birth or attendance at birth and early neonatal mortality. When adjusted for obstetric complications, the odds of early neonatal deaths for births at home without a skilled attendant were 1.3 (95% CI 1.1-1.9) and 1.2 (95% CI 1.0-2.1) with a skilled attendant when compared to births in health facilities.

**Conclusions:** When adjusted for obstetric complications, births in health facilities were associated with reduced early neonatal mortality. However, reporting and referral bias account for at least part of the association.

Tweetable abstract: Births in health facilities are linked with fewer early newborn deaths when adjusted for obstetric complications.

Keywords: early neonatal mortality, health facility, Demographic Health Survey

**Introduction**

Child mortality has decreased worldwide in the past few decades,1-9 with accelerated declines in more than 100 countries in the final phase of the Millennium Development Goals era3 These are due to a series of interconnected improvements in areas such as maternal education,10 per capita income,11 immunization, sanitation, “better nutrition”,12 and wider coverage of a short list of proven health technologies.13,14

Of the estimated 130 million infants born each year worldwide,15 2.8 million die in the first 28 days of life with three quarters of deaths occurring in the first week of life.3 In 2013, neonatal deaths accounted for 41.6% of under-5 deaths compared with 37.4% in 1990,16 and the share of neonatal deaths is projected to increase to 52 percent of under-five deaths in 2030.17

Neonatal deaths result from complications of preterm birth, asphyxia or trauma during birth, infections, severe malformations, or other specific perinatal causes.18 Obstetric complications are a major cause of stillbirths and early neonatal deaths,19 responsible for up to 58% of such outcomes.20 Therefore, prevention and treatment of pregnancy complications are critical to reduce neonatal deaths.21

In developing countries, many births occur at home for reasons related to poverty, illiteracy and control on decision-making authority, contributing to poor neonatal and maternal health status.22,23 In countries where uptake of skilled care at birth is low, women may only seek care when problems arise. If skilled care is sought when labour is prolonged, it is highly likely that hypoxia and infection have already set in, leading to poor perinatal outcomes even if skilled care is provided.24

The cornerstone of safe motherhood programmes is skilled care for all births. Essential competencies that a skilled birth attendant (SBA) should have include those required for the management of women during normal pregnancy, childbirth, and the immediate postnatal period, as well as the identification, management and/or referral when complications arise.25 However, neither type of attendance nor place of birth have been found to be strongly associated with lower neonatal mortality.26,27 The presence of a SBA in a health facility does not guarantee good quality care.28 While sub-optimal quality of care is well known, late referral of women with complications may also mask the benefit of facility births.26,27

Using Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which had reported complications during birth, we examined the association between reported complications at birth, type of attendance and place of birth with early neonatal mortality. We further adjusted for reported complications at birth, to study the beneficial effects of facility births and births attended by SBA on early neonatal mortality.

**Methods**

We conducted a secondary analysis of national DHS data from in nine countries on the association between place and attendance at birth, and maternal complications during delivery with reported early neonatal mortality. These data were from Bangladesh (2007), Colombia (2010), Honduras (2011), Indonesia (2012), Mali (2006), Niger (2006), Peru (2011), Philippines (2013), and Sao Tome and Principe (2008/2009).

DHS are nationally representative random household sample surveys measuring indicators of population including maternal and child health.29 The target population in most DHS surveys is all or ever-married women of reproductive age (15-49 years). Data are collected via face-to-face interviews by same sex trained personnel and in each survey, questionnaires are translated into major local languages. The core content of every round DHS is standard across countries to maximize the comparability of information, and includes a complete birth and death history for the children of each eligible woman. Countries may also select additional questions related to pregnancy complications from the survey questionnaire on antenatal, childbirth and postnatal-care.

Our analysis included only the most recent survey in these countries presenting data on reported life threatening obstetric complications during birth of the last infant, thus limiting our analysis to one birth per woman.

The markers of life threatening complications included high fever, convulsions, vaginal bleeding and/or prolonged labour, We pooled national datasets into one cross-sectional dataset containing 71 758 live births.

Data on obstetric complication and place of birth were calculated for all live births (n= 71 758). Data on newborns with missing information on place and attendance at birth (n=324) and maternal complications (n=698) were excluded from the analysis of early neonatal mortality and obstetric complications, thus leaving 71 060 individuals in the analysis (99.0%). There were 819 early neonatal deaths in the dataset.

Three complications during and immediately following pregnancy and childbirth were the first exposure variables in our analysis and defined as follows: prolonged labour when regular uterine contractions reportedly lasted > 12 hours; high fever when associated with foul smelling discharge (proxy for puerperal infection and possibly associated with poor neonatal outcome if secondary to intrapartum chorio-amnionitis or prolonged labour); convulsion not caused by fever (proxy for eclampsia).

While severe antepartum haemorrhage usually results in stillbirths,30 we excluded “excessive bleeding” from our analysis since most of the severe haemorrhages reported are likely to be post-partum haemorrhages which are less likely to impact on newborn outcomes.

We derived three new variables: “one complication”, “two complications” and “three complications” including all women who experienced one, two and three obstetrical complications in the same birth.

Births at home with and without an SBA were based on the reported place and type of assistance at last birth. DHS defines facility birth as “birth at any place other than at home, at someone else’s home, or en route to a facility”; we grouped in this category all private and public health facilities regardless of size. Births at home with an SBA included respondents who answered that they gave birth at home with a doctor, nurse, nurse midwife, or auxiliary nurse midwife.

The pooled analysis was performed after merging all the nine DHS country files. STATA 13.1 SE (StataCorp LP, USA) was used for statistical analysis.31  Considering the stratified sampling nature of DHS, we used a random effect model to control for unobserved factors at primary sampling unit; we also included country random effect in the pooled analysis.32

We tabulated incidence of each obstetric complication by country together with data on place of birth. We also described the distribution of maternal complications by socio-economic variables, birth order, birth spacing and place of delivery. Maternal age, maternal education, residence and household wealth quintiles, preceding birth interval (less than 18 months, 18-23 months, 24-35 months and more than 35 months), sex of infant and birth order (first born; latter born) affect perinatal outcomes.33,34 We considered all these variables as potential confounders and adjusted for them place of birth in further analysis.

A similar analysis was conducted to evaluate the risk of early deaths when women reported one, two or all three complications in the same birth.

For each country and for the pooled analysis, odds ratios (OR) were determined for early neonatal mortality and place and attendance at birth (using multiple logistic regression analysis) with and without adjustments for reported obstetric complications. Pvalues of <0.05 were considered significant.

The odds ratio between early neonatal mortality and place of birth were obtained through three distinct analyses: (1) home births without SBA versus home births with SBAs, (2) home births without SBAs versus births in health facilities, and (3) home births with SBAs versus births in health facilities. Heterogeneity among countries in the pooled association between early neonatal mortality and place of delivery was tested. We performed a subgroup analysis of countries with high institutional births choosing 80% cut off coverage threshold from previous findings.27

**Results**

Of the 71 758 total births in the nine countries with available data in their Demographic and Health Surveys, 64.4% (46 230) occurred in a health facility, 10% (7 424) at home with SBA and the remaining 24.8% (17 780) at home without SBA (missing values less than 1%). SBA coverage ranged from 18.9% (Bangladesh) to 91.0% (Colombia).

Almost 19% (13 423) reported prolonged labour, 7.0% (5 032) high fever and 3.1% (2 210) convulsions. Reports of prolonged labour ranged from 7.3% (Bangladesh) to 30.4% (Indonesia), high fever from 1.7% (Philippines) to 21.6% (Honduras); and convulsions from 1.1% (Peru) to 11.8% (Honduras) (Table 1). Missing data for attendance, place of birth and complications were < 1% (Table 1).

Of the 21 506 first order births 6 516 (30.3%) had obstetric complications; only 21.1% latter order births reported complications (Table 2). Of the 17 069 births with reported complications and information on place of birth, 1 379 (8.1%) were at home without SBA, 1 712 (10.0%) at home with SBA and the remainder in health facilities.

A clear significant linear trend appeared in the association between maternal age and complications with fewer complicated births for older mothers. Fewer obstetric complications reported by women who had had no education, lived in rural areas, were from the poorest wealth quintile and gave birth at home without SBA (Table 2).

All obstetric complications were associated with higher early neonatal mortality in the pooled analysis when adjusted for these factors and for place of birth.

In the individual country analyses, there was significant association between prolonged labour and early neonatal death in Bangladesh, Honduras, Mali and Niger. Data from all countries other than Honduras and Sao Tome and Principe showed significant association between infection with early neonatal mortality. Data from Honduras, Indonesia, Mali, Niger and Peru showed association between convulsions and early neonatal mortality. Sao Tome and Principe had no data on early neonatal death due to convulsions (Table 3).

Odds ratios (95% CI) for early neonatal mortality among infants born to women with obstetric complications increased from 1.2 (1.1-1.8) with one complication, to 1.9 (1.5-2.9) for two and 3.9 (2.1-5.5) for three complications (Table S1).

After adjusting for obstetric complications, maternal age, maternal education, household wealth, rural/urban residence, sex, birth spacing and birth order, early newborn mortality among home births with an SBA was not statistically different (OR 1.1; 95% CI 0.5-1.8) from home births without an SBA in any country and in the pooled analysis. However, with similar adjustments, early neonatal deaths in the pooled analysis were significantly more among births at home without SBA compared to births in health facilities (OR 1.3; 95% CI 1.1-1.9) (Table 4). Moderate heterogeneity (I2=35.3%) was found. Similarly, a trend to increased early neonatal mortality was noted among births at home with SBA (OR 1.2; 95% CI 1.0-2.1) when compared to births in health facilities

In sub-group analyses of pooled data from countries with more than 80% institutional births (Colombia, Honduras and Peru), the odds of early newborn mortality among home births without SBA increased to 2.4 (95% CI 1.3-4.5) while the odds of early newborn mortality among home births with SBA increased to 1.8 (95% CI 1.1-2.9).

**Discussion**

**Main findings**

In many low and middle-income countries, women may seek care in health facilities only when complications arise and the chain of adverse events leading to newborn deaths has already been initiated. Not adjusting for obstetric complications among women giving birth in facilities could therefore lead to incorrect conclusions on the effects of facility birth on newborn mortality. This secondary analysis of DHS data from nine countries showed that when adjusted for reported maternal complications during birth, births in health facility was associated with reduced early neonatal mortality. Countries with the highest SBA coverage had the greatest associated reduction in mortality from delivering in a facility. Giving birth at home with skilled birthing attendant was not associated with reduced mortality compared with births at home with no assistance.

Maternal report of the three life-threatening complications prolonged labour, infection and convulsions was strongly associated with early neonatal mortality (OR 1.7, OR 2.6 and OR 2.4 respectively). A dose-response was noted with increasing numbers of severe complications and the odds ratio of death, reaching 3.9 when all three complications were present.

Strengths and limitations

DHS use standardized questionnaires, limiting the risk of inter-country variation,35 and are generally considered high-quality surveys. DHS is sometimes the only source of maternal and child health information available in developing countries.35 However, in this report we have compared DHS data across nine countries at various times after 2005. Furthermore, only these nine countries representing three continents had data necessary for this analysis and there are large differences in place and attendance at birth among these countries. Also birth histories may contain errors since women may not want to report information on non-surviving children, thus distorting the real entity of early neonatal mortality.36,37 Maternal recall of complications, especially infections were noted to have problems in accuracy.38-42 One hospital study found accuracy of recall for infection had sensitivity of 69.2 (95% CI 48.1-84.9), specificity of 77.2 (95% CI 73.2-80.8) and likelihood ratio of 3.0 (95% CI 2.2-4.1),. In contrast, for reported convulsions the sensitivity, specificity and likelihood were 96.4 (95% CI 79.8-99.8), 87.5 (95% CI 84.2-90.3) and 7.7 (95% CI 6.4-9.9) respectively.43 Maternal recall is also influenced by health provider-patient communication44,45 and what health providers communicate by their capacity to accurately diagnose severe complications.

Another limitation is potential information bias when complications are reported after a neonatal death occurs. Women may be more likely to report complications if their babies died than had they survived. This can lead to an overestimation of any associations between complications and neonatal death.

One additional limitation in these data is the lack of information on women who died during or after childbirth, events which are likely to be associated with increased risk of early neonatal mortality. However, given relative rarity of maternal deaths compared with the frequency of neonatal deaths, the impact is likely small.

The number of deaths for single country analyses were too small for meaningful interpretation. For example in Sao Tome and Principe and Philippines DHS analyses there were only 12 and 47 early neonatal deaths respectively. In models that contain several covariates, the results were not significant (Table 4) and analysis combining more than one obstetrical complications was not feasible (Table S1).

In our analysis, we were unable to explore the role of birthweight in the overall analysis since weight at birth was missing for around 30% of the study population.

In our study population, 25% of the total live births at home without SBA contributed to only 8% of the total complications reported. Under-reporting from this group of women is likely as is the likely reporting bias related to the highest percentage of complications reported among the richest wealth quintile(Table 2). Increased deaths among poorer women (and respective children) would exacerbate this reporting bias. Complications of infection and convulsions seems over-reported in Honduras and infection rates under-reported in Bangladesh (Table 1).Thus, reporting bias is a concern at country level.

Interpretations

Neonatal mortality especially in low-income countries is largely attributed to prematurity, asphyxia and infections which often result from maternal complications such as hypertensive disease, prolonged labour and peripartum sepsis.46

A few previous reports found weak associations or no differences in neonatal mortality between births at home and in facilities.26,27,47 Two in particular, have discussed at length the role of selection bias, confounding by obstetric complications in addition to poor quality of care. In our study, no significant difference was found in early neonatal mortality between home births by skilled and non-skilled attendants even after adjusting for maternal complications.

Adjusting for complications as a potential solution was considered but not done by others due to the low reliability of self-reported complications;48-50

Quality of care is a known problem in many low and middle-income countries.51-53 Newborns in low and middle-income countries have 20 times the risk of acquiring a health care facility-acquired infection compared with those in high-income countries. Furthermore, health care facility-acquired infections may account for up to half of neonatal deaths.27

Countries with the highest SBA coverage had the highest benefit from birth in facilities. This may be related to fewer late referrals and higher quality of care in these settings. Perhaps if countries with lower facility coverage could improve quality of care as has happened in the higher coverage countries the protective effect of delivering in a facility might be vastly increased.

These findings are similar to another study reporting a 30.0% (OR 0.7; 95% CI 0.6-0.8) reduction in the adjusted odds of early neonatal mortality in communities where 80% of babies are born in facilities and progressive reduction of this protective effect with lower coverages.27

A study from Bangladesh had data over 19 years and despite the fact that early neonatal mortality was higher for health facility births compared to home births, this decreased over time as access to institutional delivery became more common.24

No significant changes in neonatal adverse outcomes between attended and non-attended home births have been observed in other studies.54,55 The main reason for this could be closely linked to the definition of SBA that does not include an assessment of provider skills.43 Poor performances due to unsatisfactory education and training of community health attendants in low-income countries are furthermore weakened by the lack of access to tests, medication and equipment necessary to reduce neonatal mortality.

**Conclusions**

While several population-based studies of perinatal mortality in low and middle-income countries examined the role of place and attendance at birth, we explored the role of intrapartum risk factors as a means to tease out the impact of referral bias. The high risks of early neonatal deaths associated with maternal complications during childbirth strengthen suggestions that efforts of SBA at health facilities to improve performance in early detection and appropriate management of problems arising in labour, supported by effective referral mechanisms, will substantially contribute to reductions in early neonatal mortality.

**Contribution to authorship**: SB, HS and MM contributed to the study conception and design. SB conducted the statistical analysis. SB and HS wrote the manuscript. SB, HS, MM and MT interpreted the data and approved the final submission.

**Ethical approval**: The institutional review board of ORC Macro (Calverton, MD, USA) and of each country approved the DHS data collection procedures including informed consent. This study used existing data obtained from ORC Macro through formal request mechanisms. As no interviews or identifying information were included, additional ethical review for the secondary analysis was not required.

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**Competing interests**: none.

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