Obstetricians' Knowledge and Practice Behaviors Concerning Periodontal Disease and Preterm Low Birth Weight

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Objective: Recent evidence has shown that periodontal disease may be a risk factor for preterm low birth weight (PTLBW). This study assessed obstetricians' knowledge and practice behaviors concerning periodontal disease and its effect on preterm low birth weight.

Methods: 194 practicing obstetricians in a five county area in central North Carolina that included three teaching hospitals were surveyed. Second and third mailings were sent to nonrespondents (N=55). Descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses were calculated using SAS.

Results: Fifty six physicians in the population were ineligible due to retirement, no longer practicing obstetrics or no longer in the study area. Of the remaining 138 eligible physicians, 55 responded yielding a 40% response rate. Sixty six percent were male, the mean age was 46 years, 78% worked in a group private practice and 42% had been practicing for more than 15 years. Ninety four percent indicated bacteria, 73% tooth decay, 69% aging and 51% excess sugar as possible risk indicators. Twenty two percent looked into patients' mouths at initial prenatal examination, 9% periodically, and 48% only when a problem was mentioned by the patient. Forty nine percent rarely or never recommended a dental examination. When asked about definite risk/possible risk factors that might contribute to PTLBW, 99% responded smoking, 94% preeclampsia, 84% periodontal disease, and 79% bacterial vaginosis. Eighty four percent considered periodontal disease to be as important a risk factor to PTLBW as those currently known in obstetrics practice.

Conclusion: Data from this study demonstrate that there is knowledge of periodontal disease and its potential role as a pregnancy risk factor but suggest limited incorporation of dental care into clinical practice.

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