



NEW REPORT ISSUED ON BRAIN INJURY IN NEWBORNS

By Ali Gorman, R.N.

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PHILADELPHIA (WPVI) -- Andrea D'Andrea's 15-year-old daughter Madison sees seven specialists. Plus, she receives physical, occupational, and speech therapy both at school and at home. But despite this, Madison is happy. "In her little world, it is a happy world," her mother said.

Madison suffered a severe stroke during the birthing process. She was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when she was 15 months old and due to hydrocephalus, a build-up of fluid within the brain, she also needed a shunt.

Andrea doesn't know what caused her baby's stroke. She doesn't believe it was due to error by medical staff but she'd like to know what happened because even if it can't help Madison now, maybe it would help other families.

Last month, a report looking into matters such as this was released by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The report, called "Neonatal Encephalopathy and Neurologic Outcome," is an update to a report that was last published in 2003.

Ronald Librizzi, DO at Virtua Health specializes in high risk pregnancies. He said the significance of the report is outstanding because it gives more insight into what may cause brain disorders in newborns. "It went from a report (in 2003) that was very rigid and looked at low oxygen levels and how that affects the brain to things that widen the spectrum of things that affect the brain," he said, adding the 2014 report looks at more factors than just oxygen level.

Mary E. D'Alton, MD, chair of the task force and maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Columbia University Medical Center in New York further explained, "We know that neonatal encephalopathy is a brain disorder with a variety of causes. Metabolic disorders, inflammations and infections, genetic conditions and oxygen deprivation to the infant are all potential causes, but we do not know how many cases are preventable. By doing a root-cause analysis we hope to identify issues that may help prevent some cases of neonatal encephalopathy in the future."

Attorney Shanin Specter of Kline & Specter in Philadelphia said this is a good step forward. On the legal side, he said the last report issued in 2003 was too strict. It only looked at a few criteria and families were often not able to receive compensation for injuries that occurred during the labor process.

It is rare for an infant to suffer an injury resulting from the birthing process but Specter said if it happens, families have to be able to seek legal compensation. "Those children can be so badly injured that they require 24 hour per day skilled nursing care and that level of care is not covered under any health insurance plan," he said, adding "the current criteria is more realistic. You have to look at the entire picture of the child in a holistic manner."

Dr. Librizzi can't comment on the legal implications of the report but said "I'm focusing on the positive of what it brings to the table for me to be able to treat children."

The report also highlights a medical milestone in treatment. Neonatal hypothermia cools a newborn's body temperature from 98.6 degrees to 92.3 degrees for 72 hours. It helps minimize long-term brain damage.

It wasn't available when Madison was born but her mother is happy to see more research like this. She said caring for a child with a disability "can be difficult but it is also extremely rewarding." She credits United Cerebral Palsy of Philadelphia for helping her family and countless others receive outstanding care and long-term support.

The Executive Summary of the task force report is published in the April issue of Obstetrics & Gynecology and in the May issue of Pediatrics.