

STARTING EARLY

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'Austin at Issue: First Steps' is a yearlong series produced by KLRU-TV (Channel 18 Cable 9) that focuses on developmental issues for children from conception to 8 years, utilizing both documentary footage and live "town hall"-type interaction between audience members and local experts. Lifestyle will preview the main issue addressed by each program the Monday before its Thursday air date. Citizens are urged to attend the broadcast and participate in the open microphone sessions. Arrive at the KLRU studios at 26th and Guadalupe streets by 7:30 p.m. Thursday for the 8 p.m. broadcast. Parking in the area is limited, so plan to arrive early.

When it gets down to dollars and cents, it doesn't make much sense to Austin's child development experts that so many pregnant women in the United States get little or no prenatal care.

Of 3.9 million babies born last year, hundreds of thousands were born prematurely, with low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds) or with birth defects. Babies born with these setbacks may face serious health problems and are more likely to die young.

The National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality estimates 34 percent of pregnant women - some 1.3 million a year - receive insufficient prenatal care and are twice as likely to have a low birth weight baby as others. More alarming: A higher percentage of babies die in the United States than in 18 other countries, making concern over prenatal care and education one of national scope.

"Low birth weight babies are a drain on our medical system because they require so much attendant services," says Linda Welsh, City of Austin child-care coordinator. "They are at risk for poor adult mental outcomes later in life as well. The bottom line is: As a community, we can't afford to have negative birth outcomes."

These issues will be discussed by experts Thursday during the second installment of Austin At Issue: First Steps. Sponsored by KLRU-TV (Channel 18 Cable 9), the monthly series is highlighting the importance of providing children with quality care, from conception through age 8.

"If you talk to the doctors at Brackenridge Hospital who deal with premature infants, they'll let you know they are being overwhelmed," says Tom Spencer, producer of public affairs programming for KLRU. "It has a lot to do with a lack of resources in the community and with people who have no insurance or money to pay for prenatal care. It

also has to do with drug abusers or people who have problems in other ways.

"During our show, we hope to emphasize the tremendous cost savings to society by casting a wider net and making sure we're reaching all the individuals who need prenatal medical and educational services."

Organizations such as the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation and CEDEN Family Resource Center hope to turn these figures around.

Last year, CEDEN provided prenatal education through home visits to 255 teens and women with high-risk pregnancies, says Emily Vargas Adams, executive director of the organization. In prior years, 4 percent of CEDEN's clients gave birth to low-weight babies. For mothers 17 and younger, the average rate is 9 percent and citywide the rate of low birth weight babies is 6 percent. Last year, the rate of low birth weight babies born to women served by CEDEN was 1.8 percent.

"We are very thrilled by the results of our prenatal education program," Adams says. "What this shows is that with early and sustained prenatal home outreach and education, in addition to prenatal care, greatly improved birth outcomes may be achieved."

The March of Dimes, once primarily geared toward researching the cause of birth defects, now spends a lot of its time trying to prevent those birth defects by educating moms and dads about the importance of taking care of themselves during pregnancy.

In 1982, the organization identified the worksite as the ideal place to introduce prenatal health promotion through its Babies and You program. Because 57 percent of the workforce today is women, with more than 38 million of child-bearing age, it seemed a logical choice for outreach and education.

Locally, the March of Dimes joined forces with industries such as IBM, NationsBank and CJC Holdings Inc. to provide prenatal educational materials and inhouse seminars on topics such as preparing for pregnancy, prenatal care, genetics, nutrition, drugs, alcohol and tobacco abuse, fitness, teen-age pregnancy, pregnancy after 35, stress and pregnancy, complications and your newborn baby.

"The mission of the March of Dimes is to reduce low birth weight babies," says Joyce Gates, community service director. Gates says some women will have problem pregnancies even if they follow doctors orders, but that good, early prenatal care can help reduce the incidence of premature and low weight babies for many women.

"Something has got to be done," says Gates. "These children are our future leaders tomorrow. We need to help them (be born) with strong, healthy bodies."

How much do you know about social issues facing Austin and Travis County?

1. When does the main development of the brain and other internal organs of a fetus take place?

2. How many of the pregnant women in Travis County each year receive late or no prenatal care?
3. How many of the low-income women served by the Austin-Travis County Health Department receive late or no prenatal care? 4. What is the infant mortality rate in Travis County?
5. What is the rate for blacks in Austin?

ANSWERS

1. During the first trimester of pregnancy.
2. 20 percent, or 2,100 women.
3. 61 percent, or 1,487 women.
4. 6.4 per 1,000 live births.
5. 12.5 per 1,000 live births.

Where to go for help:

For a list of parenting resources, dial Inside Line at 416-5700, then enter category BABY (2229) when prompted. To hear a list of agencies and organizations that provide information about pregnancy, press 1; for

health-care facilities, press 2; for baby care and parenting resources, press 3; for child-care services, press 4; and for groups that can help with special problems, press 5.

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Caption:

PHOTOSA national commission on infant mortality estimates 34 percent of pregnant women receive insufficient prenatal care. Ultimately, the consequences and cost stemming from that lack of medical attention become a societal problem.

A Brackenridge Hospital nurse cares for a premature baby in the neonatal unit. Low birth-weight babies can be at risk throughout their lives.

Lynne Dobson

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