

Maternal Mortality in Obstetric Patients who Decline Blood Products: Lessons Learnt from 52 Years of Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths in the United Kingdom (1962 – 2019)

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Objective

Patients who decline blood products because of their religious beliefs pose a unique challenge in the context of obstetric haemorrhage. Four large series assessing maternal outcomes in Jehovah's Witnesses from USA₁ UK₂, Netherlands₃ and Japan₄ estimate that maternal mortality is increased by between 44 and 160-fold. We set out to review maternal deaths in patients who decline blood products in the United Kingdom (UK) in order to detect common themes and identify learning opportunities.

Design

This was a retrospective review of all maternal deaths in the UK during the last five decades.

Method

We identified maternal deaths in patients who declined blood products using triennial Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths (CEMD) reports between 1967 and 2019. We reviewed all the information provided in the report for each case.

Results

Fifteen maternal deaths occurred in patients who declined blood products between 1967 and 2019. There were 299 maternal deaths secondary to haemorrhage the same period. Common themes noted included delay in senior escalation, hesitation to perform life-saving hysterectomy and loss of situational awareness.

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Conclusions

Guidelines from the UK's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and Royal College of Surgeons highlight the need for collaborative, Montgomery-competent discussions during the antenatal period, as well as the engagement of local Jehovah's Witness Hospital Liaison committees. Consultant-led care, antenatal optimisation of haemoglobin and techniques to mitigate blood loss at delivery are paramount. We advocate using a lower threshold for hysterectomy than was used in the cases analysed, for example when the haemoglobin level drops below 8-9g/l in the context of ongoing bleeding. As patients increasingly begin to decline blood products for non-religious reasons, the lessons learnt in the management of Jehovah's Witnesses are becoming ever more relevant.

Consider life-saving hysterectomy at 8-9g/l in the context of ongoing bleeding

References

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