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Technical paper

Taboos, traditional practices and beliefs affecting pregnancy and childbirth in Ohangwena, Oshana and Oshikoto Region: University of Namibia fourth year nursing students' rural placement experience of 2016, Oshakati campus, Namibia

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Abstract

Traditional beliefs and practices can influence the health of the people. The purpose of this article was to describe taboos and traditional practices related to pregnancy and childbirth. There was no actual research done, but taboos and traditional practices were identified during rural placement of nursing students in rural health facilities. The results indicated that there are different taboos and traditional practices related to pregnancy and childbirth, some of them are beneficial and others are detrimental to the health of the mother and the baby. In conclusion, there is a need for health care providers to strengthen health education on the importance of diet and also to educate mothers and community members on the taboos which have negative effect on the mother and babies.

Keywords: *Childbirth; Pregnancy; Rural Placement; Taboos; Traditional Practices*

1. Introduction

There are different taboos, cultural beliefs and traditional practices related to pregnancy and childbirth in various countries in the world. Some of these taboos and traditional practices are harmful to both mother and baby (M`soka et al. (2015). Nursing students need to understand taboos, cultural beliefs practiced by community members to be able to educate such members to avoid harmful practices. Hence, the University of Namibia (UNAM) is mandated to train highly qualified and competent professional nurses who are able to educate the community about taboos and traditional practices which have an adverse effect on the mothers and baby.
Nursing students are placed in rural health facilities to be exposed to situations in rural communities, since many taboos and traditional beliefs are practiced by rural communities. In 2016, as in the previous years, nursing students from University of Namibia, School of Nursing, Oshakati campus were placed in different health facilities in the north western regions of Namibia which include Ohangwena, Oshana and Oshikoto regions. During their rural placement students were expected to conduct community midwifery projects. The objectives of community midwifery projects include determining and interpreting statistics related to maternal care; collaborating with community leaders and members; identifying and describing different taboos and traditional practices affecting pregnancy and childbirth as well as conducting home visits to complete case studies on antenatal and postnatal care (UNAM 2016). This article focuses on the taboos and traditional practices related to pregnancy and child birth as identified and described by the student nurses during their rural placement of 2016.

2. Literature review

There are different taboos and traditional practices that affect pregnancy and childbirth whereby some of them are related to food prohibition.

2.1. Food taboos affecting pregnant and lactating women

Although sufficient supplies of nutrients are needed by mother and fetus, pregnant women are mostly targeted by food taboos than any other members of the society (Arzoaquoi et al. 2015). During pregnancy, the physiological nutrients demand is high, therefore a pregnant woman need to increase the quality of food one has to consume (Zerfu et al. 2016). Ugwa (2016) indicated that food taboos contribute to maternal undernutrition during pregnancy and lactation. In some part of the world, pregnant and lactating mothers are prohibited to eat nutritious and beneficial food due to taboos (Ugwa 2016). According to Meyer-Rochow (2009) as cited in Ugwa (2016), food taboos recognised by a particular group results in cohesion and assist the group to maintain its identity.
According to Arzoaquoi et al. (2015), some food taboos can be helpful during pregnancy for example shark, swordfish, king mackerel or tilefish need to be avoided during pregnancy as they contain high level of mercury which can be harmful to the developing fetus. However, the prohibition of certain food and inadequate knowledge about the benefits of some food deprive the pregnant and lactating women the nutrients they need (Ugwa 2016). M`soka et al. (2015) indicated that avoiding some food

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which is regarded as taboos do not benefit the baby neither the mother as they all need adequate nutrients, so inadequate supply of nutrients will risk the health of the mother and the baby.

According to Zerfu et al. (2016) foods which are consumed cold such as fruit and vegetables are considered to be taboo among breastfeeding mothers in Mexico, while snail and grass cutter meat are restricted among pregnant women in South Eastern Nigeria due to customs and beliefs. Washington (2015) reported that pregnant women in Indonesia were prohibited from eating eggs, fish, meat, jam and cold food as these types of food are considered to cause big babies, breech presentation or prolonged labour.

A study conducted in Arsi, Central Ethiopia reported that some vegetables such as leafy ones are considered to be taboo during pregnancy (Zerfu et al. 2016). According to that study, people believe that if a pregnant woman eats such vegetable especially after eight months of gestation, the leaf can pass into the uterus and attach itself to the head of the fetus and form a particle which can cause the immediate death of a newborn baby (Zerfu et al. 2016). The study furthermore reported that eating milk, yoghurt and cheese during pregnancy is also a taboo as it is considered to be harmful to the fetus, because it causes the baby to be born full of milk products on the head (Zerfu et al. 2016).

According to Zerfu et al. (2016), eating sugar cane in Arsi, Ethiopia during pregnancy is also a taboo as it is associated with giving birth to a large baby which results in difficult deliveries. Ugwa (2016) reported that in some parts of Nigeria such as Asaba division, pregnant women are not allowed to eat eggs or drink milk, because such food items are considered to cause a child to develop bad habits. Furthermore, Ugwa (2016) indicated that in Ika division of Nigeria, pregnant women are prohibited from eating porcupine as it is considered to delay labour.

Milk, eggs, fish and goat meat are some of the major food considered to be taboos in various countries during pregnancy and this has contributed to inadequate dietary intake especially in the developing countries (Ugwa 2016). In Tanzania, it is believed that if a pregnant woman eats fish, it will hurt the woman `s abdomen resulting in prolonged pregnancy (Arzoaquoi et al. 2015). Furthermore, Arzoaquoi et al. (2015) indicated that pregnant women in Tanzania are not allowed to eat meat from a farm animal, because the baby will pick up characteristics of such animal. In Ghana, pregnant women are prohibited from eating snail to avoid giving birth to salivating babies (Arzoaquoi et al. 2015). Furthermore, pregnant women in some parts of Ghana are restricted to vegetarian diet and they are prohibited from eating meat and groundnuts as this could lead to giving birth to a child with spirit (Arzoaquoi et al. 2015).

Arzoaquoi et al. (2015) further reported that eating ripe plantain and pineapple during pregnancy are considered to cause waist pain, early labour and abortion, while coconuts are associated with causing blindness to the child. A study conducted in Kenya by Rianga et al. (2017) reported that pregnant women are not allowed to eat food items such as liver, intestines, kidney, milk, sweet potatoes, sugar, salt, eggs and bananas, because they are believed to cause obstructed labour. Some people in Kenya especially in Kalenjin ethnic group believe that if a pregnant woman eats tongue from a cow or goat, the child will be talkative, while some food like meat are believed to cause misfortune to the mother (Rianga et al. 2017). Aziato et al. (2016) stated that some traditional beliefs and practices restrict the pregnant women to eat and drink in public, because if they do so they can be affected by evil spirits. According to Meyer--Rochow (2009), food taboos seem to make no sense, because some food items are declared unfit by one group, but acceptable by another.

2.2. Other taboos, traditional practices and beliefs related to pregnancy and childbirth

There are also some taboos, traditional beliefs and cultural practices which are not related to food. A study conducted in Ghana by Aziato et al (2016) reported that some pregnant women are camped for some days and bathed with urine, they are then sent to buy some shallot from the market without talking to anyone to ensure ancestral protection, safe delivery and normal baby.

According to Darko (1992) as cited in Arzoaquoi et al (2015), pregnant women in some area of Ghana are not allowed to buy tomatoes, peppers and eggplant as this was considered a taboo resulting in babies to be infected with severe rashes and suffer from some form of disability.

In Hebei, China, some behaviour taboos result in women not to bathe, wash their hairs or brush their teeth after giving birth as this is considered to cause possible headache and body pain which could develop in years to come (Liu et al. 2006). According to Lamxay et al (2011), cultural traditions which include postpartum confinement, steam baths are common in South East Asia. Lamxay et al. (2011) furthermore reported that women in the Kry ethnic group in southern Asia are not allowed to bathe until the fifth day postpartum, but can only change clothes and sheet. According to Lamxay et al (2011), Kry ethnic group believes that if pregnant woman consumes banana plant pseudo stem or young leaf-sheath every day, it will result in easy and smooth delivery of the baby.

3. Method

There was no actual research done. The rural placement activities were carried out during June 2016 when a total number of sixty eight (68) nursing students were placed in fourteen (14) rural health facilities in Ohangwena, Oshana and Oshikoto region. Nursing students were required to identify any pregnant woman during antenatal care at a rural health facility and then visit such woman in a group of five (maximum), at least twice before she delivers.

The identification of taboos and traditional practices related to pregnancy was done during antenatal care visit at health facilities and also during home visits. Students were also required to identify a woman who delivered about 7 -10 days ago, visits the woman twice before 6 weeks and identify taboos and traditional practices related to childbirth. Students used community midwifery log books to compile a list of taboos and traditional practices related to pregnancy and child birth and to find out the reasons for such taboo or practice from the concerned mother and relatives.

4. Results

The following taboos, cultural beliefs and traditional practices were identified as indicated in the table below:

Table 1: Taboos, Traditional Beliefs and Practices Related To Pregnancy and Childbirth

Food taboos related to pregnancy and childbirth	Other taboos, traditional practices and beliefs related to pregnancy and childbirth
• A pregnant woman should not eat meat from a pregnant animal; she may give birth to a stillbirth. • A pregnant woman should not eat meat from wild animals; it will cause the baby to be born deaf. • If a pregnant woman craves for meat, she will give birth to a baby boy. • If a pregnant woman eat tortoise meat, the baby `s walk-	• When a pregnant woman is collecting firewood, she must not try to break it with her knees; otherwise the baby's umbilical cord will break off before the baby is born. • If a pregnant woman wears trousers, the baby will have a big forehead. • If a pregnant woman happens to hate someone, the baby will look like such person. • A pregnant woman should not lie on her abdomen; otherwise she will give

ing will be delayed.
- A pregnant woman must not eat fish, it may cause precipitated labour.
- A pregnant woman should not eat food directly from a pot; otherwise the baby will be born with black marks on the body.
- A pregnant woman should not eat sugar; otherwise the baby will be born with white spots.
- If two or more pregnant women eat from the same container, the babies to be born will hate each other when they grow up.
- A pregnant woman should not eat cold porridge; otherwise she will pass stool a lot during delivery.
- A pregnant woman should not eat mopane worms, the baby will salivate a lot.
- A pregnant woman should not eat eggs; the baby will be born without hairs (bold head).
- If a pregnant woman eats milk, the baby will have a tendency of vomiting.
- A pregnant woman must not eat spicy or chili food; the baby will be born with red eyes.
- If a pregnant woman drinks beer while pregnant she will give birth to a large baby.
- A pregnant woman should not eat oranges or drink fanta; the baby will be born jaundiced.
- A pregnant woman should not drink anything made with ginger, she will develop polyhydramnios.
- A pregnant woman should drink "tombo" (an alcoholic traditional brew), so that the baby can be born light in complexion.
- A pregnant woman should not eat fish, it may cause precipitated labour.
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- A pregnant woman should not eat sugar; otherwise the baby will be born with white spots.
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5. Discussion

It is evident that there are different taboos and traditional beliefs being practiced by community members in the north western part of Namibia related to pregnancy and child birth. Some of the taboos related to food deprived mothers and unborn babies important nutrients which are needed even for the growth of the fetus.

Food which are prohibited to be eaten during pregnancy include eggs, meat, fish, mopane worms and some fruits as it was identified also by other author (Ugwa 2016). These types of food are good sources of protein and vitamins, therefore preventing mothers to eat such food may result in deficiency of some important nutrients. Some food taboos identified are helpful as other authors have indicated (Arzoaquoi et al. 2015). These include prohibition of pregnant woman from drinking beer, and restriction of eating spicy food. Alcohol has a negative effect to both mother and the baby and spicy and chilli food can result in heartburn.

Other taboos, traditional practices and beliefs which are not related to food were also identified during rural placement as it was also reported by other researchers (Aziato et al. 2016). Some of these taboos and traditional practices are benefiting the mother, fetus and family. These include being faithful to the partner as this can prevent Sexual transmitted infections (STI) and not to climb while pregnant it can also prevent falling and injuries. However, some practices are not good to the health of the mother such as not bathing during labour. It is therefore necessary for the nursing students to advice mothers and the community on those taboos and traditional practices which are harmful.

6. Conclusion

Culture, taboos and traditional beliefs and practices have a greater influence on pregnancy and childbirth. Restrictions of some food are harmful to both the mother and unborn baby. The results of this exercise indicated that pregnant and lactating mothers are prohibited to eat some food and do some activities due to cultural beliefs. Hence, health education needs to be strengthened on various issues related to taboos, cultural beliefs and traditional practices. The lesson learned from this activity, especially by nursing

students is the need to advice mothers and the community on diet and the importance of different nutrients in the body.

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