

Edwards and Govindaswami: Helping pregnant women gain early treatment

By Leonard Edwards and Dr. Balaji Govindaswami, Special to The Mercury News

More than a thousand babies are born every day having been exposed to harmful substances during pregnancy, and these numbers have risen significantly in the past year.

Hospitals, doctors, child welfare workers, and juvenile courts are overwhelmed with babies who need intensive care and mothers who need treatment services. Some of these substances can be legally obtained (alcohol, tobacco), some prescribed by a doctor (pain killers such as Vicodin, oxycodone, and methadone for women committed to recovery), and yet others are illegally obtained (heroin, methamphetamines, and marijuana).

The impact on these babies does not end with the problems at birth. Many of them will grow up and struggle in school, exhibit abnormal behaviors, and struggle in life.

Neurodevelopmental studies have shown that these children's ability to self-regulate and to learn are harmed by prenatal substance exposure.

When questioned, many mothers will say that they didn't believe ingestion of any of these substances would have an impact on their baby. "I never thought a drink or two would harm my baby," they say. The medical truth is that they do. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology reports that during pregnancy there is no safe amount of alcohol for pregnant women. Similar parallels exist for marijuana and several newer designer drugs.

Doctors, nurses, social workers and judges can do little to prevent mothers from ingesting any of these harmful substances. We receive these cases after the fact, after the baby is born having been exposed to these substances. Yet, we have a significant interest, both as professionals and as concerned citizens who want our next generation to be healthy at birth. We want to identify answers to the following questions: What is being done in our community to reduce prenatal exposure to harmful substances, to ensure these mothers get the support they need to stop ingesting these harmful substances, and to respond to the thousands of infants and children and their families impacted by prenatal and postnatal substance exposure?

We write this to everyone in our community, knowing there are many opportunities to intervene in the lives of women who use during pregnancy. Let's all agree that these substances have no place in the life of someone who is bringing a new being into the world. Parents sacrifice for their children in so many ways after a child is born, but this may be the most important sacrifice of all. Getting a pregnant woman the help she needs and bringing a substance-free baby into the world will prevent not only serious medical issues at birth, but also developmental difficulties that may arise later in childhood.

Whether you are a pregnant mother, a family member, or a friend of a pregnant mother, respect the condition of pregnancy. Remind pregnant mothers of the dangers of continued use of harmful substances. Urge them to attend prenatal visits with their doctor. If the problem is severe, pregnant mothers should call the Department of Alcohol and Drug services Gateway Call Center (800-488-9918) for help in getting an assessment and confidential referral to appropriate treatment.

Our next generation is counting on us to prevent the birth of substance-exposed babies and produce healthy children. Let us all work together to achieve these goals.

Leonard Edwards is a retired Santa Clara County Superior Court judge. Dr. Balaji Govindaswami is the chief of newborn medicine at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center. They wrote this for The Mercury News.