

23rd January 2008

Soames Takes GBS Petition to No 10

A petition delivered to the Prime Minister on the 23rd January calls on the Government to save babies' lives by making sensitive testing for Group B Streptococcus (GBS) available to all pregnant women on the NHS. The UK is lagging behind many countries where this life-saving test is a standard part of antenatal care.

The petition was drawn up by the charity Group B Strep Support and Pregnancy & Birth Magazine as part of a joint campaign to end the needless suffering and loss of life caused by preventable GBS infections. Nicholas Soames MP, Theresa May MP, Jeffrey Donaldson MP MLA, Philip Hollobone MP, Nia Griffith MP and TV medic Dr Chris Steele and members of the charity and magazine staff delivered the petition of more than 11,000 signatures to No 10 Downing Street.

Nicholas Soames said; "The Government has so far failed to introduce routine screening of pregnant women for GBS carriage on the NHS. What is the cost to the NHS of caring for the 700 newborn babies each year who develop pneumonia, meningitis and septicaemia as a result of this infection, which is usually entirely preventable? Add to that, the ongoing costs of caring for the 40 or so babies who are left with permanent brain damage. Does it really pay the NHS to leave GBS infection to fate?"

As many as three out of 10 pregnant women may carry the GBS bacterium. Most are unaware of this fact, yet it is the most common cause of life-threatening infection in new-born babies in the UK and kills 75 babies every year. Giving antibiotics during labour to women whose babies are most at risk usually prevents GBS infection in the baby. Group B Strep Support says that were expectant mothers routinely tested for GBS, doctors could prevent over 80% of these infections. According to recent medical research, testing all pregnant women for GBS using the sensitive test, plus treating those found to be at higher risk, would not only save lives but would save the Government £37 million a year.

In many countries, including France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Slovenia, South Africa, Australia, Canada and the USA, testing for GBS is a routine part of antenatal care, but in the UK most expectant mothers are not offered a test for GBS or even informed about it. If they are, the test widely used by the NHS gives a false negative result to around 50% of carriers. Sensitive testing is usually only available privately.

Jane Plumb from Haywards Heath set up the charity Group B Strep Support with her husband Robert after their second son, Theo, died from a GBS infection in 1996. She said; "It's disgraceful that the NHS is using a test which is so unreliable. Offering accurate testing to all pregnant women on the NHS would enable mothers to protect their babies from this deadly infection. This tragic death toll of tiny lives can and must be brought to an end."

Nicholas Soames added; "It is imperative that the Government takes note of the very substantial All Party support to get this wicked infection in new born babies dealt with far more effectively. Jane Plumb and her Group have done a wonderful job to raise public awareness and the Government must now act."

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Notes

Group B Strep Support; 01444 416176 - www.gbss.org.uk

