

Extending awareness about prenatal nutrition in rural India: unearthing the ground realities

In year 2009 we had gone for a pilot testing of a novel idea of extending nutrition awareness among expectant mothers registered to an urban health care setting and had compared the results of the intervention with a hospital registry control of previous years with a similar standard of antenatal care minus nutrition related awareness. A significant improvement in birth weight of newborns was observed among intervention group when it was compared with controls. Nutritionally aware expectant mothers were also found to experience reduced pregnancy related complications ante, post or para-natally.

Encouraged with the results, we proposed to extend the benefits of the program to rural women who are known to have malnutrition and anemia as common pregnancy associated problems. We selected a rural setting 30 km away from Lucknow to run the program. Before launching the program, we had gone for a survey of selected village to find the basic amenities available to the habitants and their specified needs and problems.

In year 2010, while actually running the program we face much resistance from villagers and also observed many intrinsic problems like poverty, unavailability of traditional cereals and foods, change in agriculture pattern, unavailability of dairy products, poor appreciation of nutrition component of food, poor decision making authority lying upon women at home and economic pressures driving the decision making pertaining to their choice of food.

Besides that we also observed resistance towards investigations and routine ANC among most pregnant women. It was therefore largely perceived that nutrition related awareness cannot be created unless these intrinsic issues are handled adequately beforehand.

The findings of this pragmatic study are accepted for presentation in 3rd National Bioethics Conference, All India Institute of Medical College, New Delhi, 17-20 November 2010.

We grace fully acknowledge the Nutrition grant award from Consumer Wellness center, Arizona, USA for consecutive two years which enabled us to enter into the fascinating and challenging field of nutrition to the expectant mother. Seeing various intrinsic factors inherent to India rural settings, this task has become more challenging comparing to various other countries.

We have learned through our pilot projects that extending nutrition awareness to expectant mothers can do wonders in reducing the pregnancy and its outcome related complications in mother and child. Simultaneously, we also have learned that in rural settings and in economically lower population, establishing and implementing such nutrition awareness program is a difficult task. Taking the inferences from these learning, we propose that a nutrition awareness plan should have a focal approach, focusing primarily upon balancing the needs and resources available in a local setting. It should also focus upon rural psycho-social barriers which may limit the extension of such program in a particular setting.

In our future program, we wish to work through these learning which we could infer in our previous two pilot programs.