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We may return unduly long letters to the author for shortening so that we can offer readers as wide a selection as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors. We cannot acknowledge their receipt unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

Screening for open neural-tube defects in England and Wales

SIR,—Since the report of the UK Collaborative Alpha-Fetoprotein (AFP) Study¹ was published in 1977 there has been much discussion regarding the introduction of routine antenatal screening for open neural-tube defects by maternal serum AFP measurement, and a number of screening programmes have been described.²⁻⁴ To determine the extent of screening in England and Wales we undertook a national survey.

Early in 1978 a questionnaire was sent to the area medical officer of each of the 98 area health authorities in England and Wales. Each was asked whether screening was being carried out in his area, and if so how many pregnancies had been screened during 1977 and who financed the service. Information was also sought on the number of ultrasound machines which could be used for the further investigation of patients with positive serum AFP tests.

An area was regarded as undertaking screening if one or more of its districts provided a service. The table shows that 31 areas undertook screening in 1977. In these areas 70 066 (33%) pregnancies which resulted in the birth of one or more registrable infants were screened; in England and Wales as a whole 72 941 (13%) were reported as having maternal serum AFP tests. The latter figure includes tests done on selected women from

50 areas not undertaking screening, and when such an area did not specify the *actual* number tested this was assumed to be 10. In both percentages the numerators relate to women tested but the denominators exclude those whose pregnancy ended in an abortion, and this will overestimate the true percentages, probably by less than 1%. In 24 of the 31 areas (77%) undertaking screening this was financed by the National Health Service, and in the other seven from a combination of sources, mainly the Department of Health and Social Security and the University Grants Committee. Ninety-one areas (93%) had at least one ultrasound machine available for screening, and 57 had at least two; in all there were 212 machines available. Early in 1979 a second questionnaire was sent to areas not undertaking screening in 1977 to see if a service had subsequently been started. Fourteen more areas had done so, bringing the total to 45 (nearly half).

With the introduction of AFP screening there is a need to monitor its results. This could be done if area health authorities noted the number of pregnancies screened (to ascertain the take-up) and reviewed the records of all pregnancies where open fetal neural-tube defects were found (to determine the proportion of affected pregnancies detected antenatally). Information on the

proportion of unaffected pregnancies terminated as a result of screening could be collected routinely by modifying Form HSA3 used for the statutory notification of a termination of pregnancy. When an abortion was performed on the grounds that "there was a substantial risk that if the child had been born it would have suffered from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped" the following information could be sought: (a) whether a fetal neural-tube defect had been suspected, and if so how the diagnosis had been made; (b) whether a serum AFP screening test had been done; (c) whether the fetus was abnormal, and if so what the abnormality was; and (d) whether the fetus had been examined pathologically. The results of such monitoring would be of great assistance to those responsible for the delivery of screening programmes.

We thank all the area medical officers in England and Wales and their colleagues for their help in answering our questions; and we thank the medical statistics division of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys for providing a tabulation of the provisional number of pregnancies resulting in the birth of registrable infants in each area for 1977.

N WALD
HOWARD S CUCKLE
CATHERINE A HARWOOD

ICRF Cancer Epidemiology
and Clinical Trials Unit,
Department of the Regius
Professor of Medicine,
Radcliffe Infirmary,
Oxford OX2 6HE

¹ UK Collaborative Study in Relation to neural-tube Defects, *Lancet*, 1977, **1**, 1323.

² Ferguson-Smith, M A, *et al*, *Lancet*, 1978, **1**, 1330.

³ Brock, D J H, *et al*, *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 1978, **85**, 575.

⁴ Wald, N J, *et al*, *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 1979, **86**, 91.

Fetal hazards of altering hypotensive regimens in pregnancy

SIR,—Oxprenolol may be superior to methyl dopa in the management of hypertension in pregnancy (Dr E D M Gallery and others (16 June, p 1591)). The following case history suggests that changes of hypotensive

Number of pregnancies screened for open neural-tube defects in England and Wales in 1977

	No of areas	No of pregnancies resulting in the birth of one or more registrable infants	No (%) of pregnancies screened
Areas undertaking serum AFP screening ..	31	215 108	70 066 (33)
All areas in England and Wales ..	98	568 534	72 941* (13)

*Includes women who had serum AFP tests in the 50 areas in which these tests were performed only on selected women, mainly those who had previously had an infant with a neural-tube defect.