

General Studies-2; Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health

Infant Deaths in India

1) Introduction

- Recently there were deaths of babies in J K Lon Hospital in Kota, Rajasthan, and in the civil hospital in Rajkot, Gujarat
- Similar recent incidents have painted a grim picture of the crumbling health infrastructure in other low-performing states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

2) Present Status

- Every day, India witnesses the death of an estimated 2,350 babies aged less than one year.
- Among them, an average 172 are from Rajasthan and 98 from Gujarat.
- India has the most child deaths in the world.
- The infant mortality rate (IMR) in the country currently stands at 33 per 1,000 live births.
- India's IMR remained worse than that of Nepal (28), Bangladesh (27), Bhutan (26), Sri Lanka (8) and China (8).
- The problem remains severe in the northern Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Assam and Uttar Pradesh.

3) Why do so many infants die in India every year?

- **Among the factors that have been proved detrimental to child survival are**
 - a. Lack of education in the mother
 - b. Malnutrition (more than half of Indian women are anaemic)
 - c. Age of the mother at the time of birth
 - d. Spacing, and whether the child is born at home or in a facility.
- The World Health Organization reports that babies who die within the first 28 days of birth often suffer from conditions and diseases associated with a lack of quality care at birth or in the days immediately after.
- According to a UNICEF, "Children born to mothers with at least 8 years of schooling have 32% lesser chances of dying in neonatal period and 52% lesser chances in the post-neonatal period, as compared to the illiterate mothers."
- Infant and under-five mortality rates are highest among mothers under age 20.
- According to the National Family Health Survey-4, only 78.9% births in India happen in a facility.
- This means 21.1% or about 54 lakh births in a year still happen outside of a facility where hygiene levels can be low, sometimes without the help of a trained health worker.
- Apart from the infection risks in a non-institutional birth, vaccine compliance too is usually worse in these cases.
- According to the Health Ministry, the vaccination cover in India after several rounds of Intensified Mission Indradhanush (MI) and the original MI, now stands at 87%.
- This means over 33 lakh children continue to miss out on some or all vaccinations every year.

4) Lack of proper infrastructure

- Limited number of beds creating conditions of overcrowding, where newborns are placed closer together and at more risk for potential infection to spread.
- Lack of hygiene all around public hospitals.

- Poor hygiene practice increases the risk of infection.
- In many government-run hospitals, neonatal intensive care units have a dearth of trained nursing staff.
- Visitors often don't wear masks while entering NBCU [Newborn Care Units].
- Threats from the outside too like open defecation, wild pigs, often choked sewers, and indiscriminate tobacco spits.

5) Educating Women

- Household wealth and maternal education play an important role in infant and child mortality.
- States with more educated women show better health outcomes for children
- Anganwadi Workers and ASHA have a great responsibility in educating parents about prenatal and postnatal care.

6) Way Forward

- We need to ensure timely and prompt referrals, identify and manage diseases causing prematurity, better facilities at hospitals.
- New-born healthcare awareness and remedial actions at home are some of the issues to be addressed.
- Deaths of children in government hospital must be a wake-up call, draw attention to state of public healthcare.
- It is important to advocate kangaroo care [a method of holding premature infants so that there is skin-skin contact which keeps them warm] and to monitor neonates constantly
- Public health must be pushed to the top of the political agenda and political parties must be accountable for the state of healthcare in the country.
- Better supervisory systems to fix accountability also need to be in place. The Kota tragedy must be a wake-up call.
- Government must take proactive steps to avoid these preventable child deaths due to lack of health system capacity