

# N.C. can act against birth defects

BY SHARON J. O'DONNELL

**CARY** — I've read with interest lately about couples planning the conception of their child so the birth will take place at the start of the new millennium. While I admire their enthusiasm, I'm hoping they haven't rushed into anything — and have given top priority to the health of their child.

For example, do they know that if women take a daily vitamin with folic acid for one to three months prior to conception, their baby's chances of being born with a neural tube defect will be reduced by up to 70 percent?

Neural tube defects (NTDs) are central nervous system closure defects.

## POINT OF VIEW

They are the second-most-common type of birth defect (after congenital heart defects). They include spina bifida, in which the spine doesn't close and sometimes develops into brain abnormalities. Though most people with spina bifida can lead productive lives, it is the leading cause of childhood paralysis.

Anencephaly, another NTD, is a fatal condition in which a baby is born with a severely underdeveloped brain and skull.

These defects originate in the first month of pregnancy — before many women even realize they are pregnant. Folic acid, a B vitamin contained in most multivitamins, is very effective in preventing NTDs, as well as cleft palate and lip, but it must be taken before conception and during pregnancy.

It is very difficult to obtain enough folic acid from diet alone, and the synthetic form found in vitamins is more easily absorbed by the body. Yet a 1997 March of Dimes survey showed that only 30 percent of women take a multivitamin containing folic acid before pregnancy.

Sadly, North and South Carolina lead the nation in occurrence of neural tube defects, according to Dr. Godfrey Oakley of the Centers for Disease Control. A state Department of Health Statistics report says one in 500 live births in North Carolina is affected by NTDs each year.

And each year between 3,000 and 5,000 babies are born in the state with birth defects serious enough to affect survival or the long-term health of the child. To prevent NTDs and other birth defects, more in-depth information is needed about the occurrence of certain types of defects. Valuable information is lacking.

The March of Dimes and other agencies are planning a Folic Acid Awareness Campaign to help reduce NTDs. But first these groups need to know where to target prevention efforts — which demographic groups, geographic regions and environmental factors.

A bill in the current session of the General Assembly, setting up a Birth Defect Monitoring Program, could provide the missing puzzle piece. It seeks an appropriation of \$325,600 for the state Department of Health and Human Services to establish a timely program to record the occurrence of birth defects in each region; to analyze birth defect data; and to use the information in the development of prevention programs. State Sen. William Purcell of Laurinburg and Rep. Mia Morris of Fayetteville are sponsoring this bill; it has been introduced in the Senate as Senate Bill 834. May 11 will be Lobby Day for the bill, a day on which the March of Dimes, the Perinatal Association and other supportive groups will talk to legislators about its importance and profound impact.

Birth defects are a leading cause of death in babies under 1 year of age. Unfortunately, North Carolina ranks 47th in infant mortality, and more babies die before their first birthday in our state than in almost any other. In 1997, 982 babies here died before their first birthday. In an average week, 18 babies under a year old die. This is nothing to celebrate.

In addition to the families' personal tragedies, there are huge financial costs. According to the 1998 state Center for Health Statistics report, hospital costs for children with birth defects total \$35 million each year in North Carolina, exceeding the costs for childhood injuries, infectious disease and cancer combined.

The real tragedy, though, is the many birth defects that could be prevented, the many lives that could be changed, if only there was a way to take full advantage of the prevention information we have.

It would be great to welcome one's child into the world as a new millennium is celebrated, but the most important thing to celebrate is the birth of a healthy baby. With the Birth Defect Monitoring Program and subsequent prevention programs like the March of Dimes' Folic Acid Awareness Campaign, there can be many more first birthday celebrations all over North Carolina. Saving North Carolina's babies is a fight we have to win.

*Sharon J. O'Donnell writes a family life column for The Cary News and is co-chair of the local March of Dimes Public Affairs committee.*

