You Don’t Have to Be Infected to Suffer: COVID-19 and Racial Disparities in Severe Maternal Morbidity and Mortality

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Abstract

Both coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and maternal mortality disproportionately affect minorities. However, direct viral infection is not the only way that the former can affect the latter. Most adverse maternal events that end in hospitals have their genesis upstream in communities. Hospitals often represent a last opportunity to reverse a process that begins at a remove in space and time. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create these upstream injuries, but it has brought them to national attention, exacerbated them, and highlighted the need for health care providers to move out of the footprint of their institutions. The breach between community events that seed morbidity and hospitals that attempt rescues has grown in recent years, as the gap between rich and poor has grown and as maternity services in minority communities have closed. COVID-19 has become yet another barrier. For example, professional organizations have recommended a reduced number of prenatal visits, and the platforms hospitals use to substitute for some of these visits are not helpful to people who either lack the technology or the safe space in which to have confidential conversations with providers. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for departments of obstetrics and gynecology. Community-based organizations including legal professionals, health-home coordinators, and advocacy groups, surround almost every hospital, and can be willing partners with interested departments. COVID-19 has made it clearer than ever that it is time to step out of the footprint of our institutions, and to recognize that the need to find upstream opportunities to prevent downstream tragedies.

Keywords

- disparity
- COVID-19
- race
- maternal mortality

Key Points

• COVID-19 will exacerbate disparities in perinatal outcomes.
• The virus, per se, is not the pandemic’s biggest threat to the health of minority women.
• The solution to maternal mortality cannot be found within the walls of hospitals.

The disproportionate number of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related deaths suffered by minorities has been widely reported, and it mirrors what is known about maternal mortality. Accordingly, COVID-19 infections may marginally increase disparities in maternal mortality. However, even if no women were infected, the COVID-19 pandemic could still exacerbate disparities in maternal outcomes. As such, it highlights where much of the solution to disparities must lie.
Historically, efforts to reduce maternal mortality have focused on creating safer inpatient experiences. By developing algorithms, encouraging teamwork and drills and creating simulations and regionalization, the treatment of hemorrhage, hypertension, deep venous thrombosis, and sepsis has improved. However, a careful look at deaths and serious morbidities in 2020 makes the singular focus on inpatient, that is, downstream events hard to justify. In reality, the attention paid to events in the hospital is in large part because that is where physicians practice. It is not because the etiology and earlier opportunities to intercede do not exist elsewhere. The breach between upstream (in community) events that seed morbidity and downstream (in hospital) interventions that try to reverse the course of disease, has grown through the years as the gap between rich and poor has grown, and as maternity services in minority communities have closed. COVID-19 is both a biologic threat, and another challenge to the social determinants of health that already disfavor poor and minority women. COVID 19-based fear of hospitals, and hospitals’ adoption of protocols that reduce the number of provider-patient contacts during the prenatal period, have led to diminished opportunities for downstream “saves,” and underscore the need for upstream interventions.

Our awareness of nonbiologic contributors to morbidity has grown rapidly over the last decades. The terms “structural racism,” “implicit bias,” and “social determinants of health” appear much more often in the literature than they did in previous generations. While a provider may not hear those particular words on rounds, if they work in underserved communities, they will hear terms that should raise their specter and help providers to recognize the link between the particular words on rounds, if they work in underserved communities, they will hear terms that should raise their specter and help providers to recognize the link between the communities, they will hear terms that should raise their specter and help providers to recognize the link between the terms they do hear and adverse events. Every time a patient is admitted to a hospital, the provider may not hear those terms, and yet the reality is that death of a patient in a hospital bringsontechnical interventions that try to reverse the course of disease, has grown through the years as the gap between rich and poor has grown, and as maternity services in minority communities have closed. COVID-19 is both a biologic threat, and another challenge to the social determinants of health that already disfavor poor and minority women. COVID 19-based fear of hospitals, and hospitals’ adoption of protocols that reduce the number of provider-patient contacts during the prenatal period, have led to diminished opportunities for downstream “saves,” and underscore the need for upstream interventions.

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physicians are to assure patients the best possible outcomes. There are opportunities. Community-based organizations, including legal professionals, health-home coordinators, and advocacy groups, surround almost every hospital and can be willing partners with interested departments. The effort needed to forge these links may seem herculean. But, COVID-19 has reminded us that physicians are capable of herculean efforts. If we can battle a viral pandemic, we can confront a social one as well. COVID-19 has made it clearer than ever that it is time to step out of the footprint of our institutions and recognize that there are upstream opportunities to prevent downstream tragedies.

Conflict of Interest
None declared.

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