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Congenital rubella syndrome surveillance in South Africa using a sentinel site approach: A cross-sectional study

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Background: Congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) includes disorders associated with intrauterine rubella infection. The incidence of CRS is higher in countries with no rubella-containing vaccines (RCV) in their immunization schedules. In the World Health Organization African region, RCVs are being introduced as part of the 2012-2020 global measles and rubella strategic plan. This study aimed to describe the epidemiology of confirmed CRS in South Africa prior to the introduction of RCVs in the immunization schedule.

Methods: This was a descriptive study with 28 sentinel sites reporting laboratory-confirmed CRS cases in all nine provinces of South Africa. In the retrospective phase (2010 to 2014), CRS cases were retrieved from medical records and in the prospective phase (2015 to 2017) clinicians at study sites reported CRS cases monthly.

Results: There were 42 confirmed CRS cases in the retrospective phase and 53 confirmed CRS cases in the prospective phase. Most frequently reported birth defects were congenital heart disease and cataracts. The median age of mothers of CRS cases was 21 years in the retrospective phase (range: 11 to 38 years) and 22 years in the prospective phase (range: 15 to 38 years).

Conclusion: Baseline data on laboratory-confirmed CRS obtained in this study will enable monitoring for the planning and implementation of RCV in the South African EPI program. Mothers of infants with CRS were mostly young women 14 to 30 years old, indicating a potential immunity gap in this age group to be considered during the introduction of RCV.

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