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The epidemiology of birthweight and placental weight in New Zealand

Volume 1 (Text)

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
University of Auckland, July 1997
The epidemiology of birthweight and placental weight in New Zealand

Volume 2 (Figures and Tables)

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Auckland, July 1997
Abstract

The introduction to this thesis is a literature review. Kramer, in a study commissioned by WHO, reviewed the literature prior to 1985 on low birthweight. This is extended, mainly in respect to infants who are small for gestational age, with emphasis on important findings in relation to birthweight since that time. Work in New Zealand on birthweight is also summarised. The literature is also reviewed in respect to the mechanisms in the pathway between the placenta and the fetus, and in respect to recent work suggesting a link between birthweight and disease in adult life.

This thesis examines factors that influence birthweight and placental weight.

Birthweight for gestational age percentile curves for the New Zealand population were firstly defined. Small for gestational age (SGA) infants could then be categorised.

The thesis considers two sources of data, the first a cross-sectional sample of the New Zealand population from 1987 to 1990 (the control subjects of the New Zealand Cot Death Study, a national case-control study on sudden infant death syndrome), and the second a hospital population in Auckland (National Womens Hospital (1992)).

These two datasets are investigated to determine factors that influence birthweight in a univariate situation and then in the multivariate situation. Independent variables are considered using a priori categorisations and where appropriate Quantile-Quantile (Q-Q) derived categorisations determined by producing plots of the quantiles of cases versus controls.

A number of variables under the headings of socio-demographic, lifestyle, genetic, obstetric and nutrition are examined and found to be associated with the outcomes of interest at the univariate level. After controlling in multivariate analyses a number of variables are found to be no longer significant, however some show strong relationships.

The variable relating to smoking in both datasets shows the greatest detrimental effect on the outcomes considered in respect to birthweight. This confirms that in New Zealand, as in other places in the world, smoking has significant consequences on birthweight. The data is also investigated for the timing of insult to the fetus from smoking, and is found to be most important during pregnancy.
Comparison of the results comparing those obtained using a binary outcome for SGA, and those obtained using birthweight continuously, show relatively consistent results. The odds ratios and the decreases in birthweight obtained from both datasets show a relatively linear relationship between the two.

An examination into whether a distinct group of individuals exists in respect to having large placentae for birthweight, indentified an artefact in the dataset relating to recording of placental weight for twins. After removal of twins from the dataset, examination of factors that influence placental weight showed that the factors that influence placental weight are not the same as those that influence birthweight. In particular smoking is found not to influence placental weight, and haemoglobin, which has no influence on birthweight, is found to be inversely associated with placental weight. Other factors such as parity are found to influence placental weight in the same proportion in which birthweight is affected.

In conclusion this thesis shows that factors investigated in New Zealand are consistent with findings in the international literature in relation to birthweight. The results on factors that influence placental weight add to the international literature on a topic on which little work has been carried out.

The results of this thesis point to areas where future research needs to be carried out, in particular in relation to maternal nutrition during pregnancy and maternal energy expenditure during pregnancy. There is also a need for further research into the relationships of factors on placental weight and the ratio of birthweight to placental weight, and how these relationships affect health outcomes in childhood and adult life.
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, and their fore-bears, without who’s individual struggles through the passage of time the existence of this thesis in this form would not have been possible. It now seems they may have played a greater part in further generations of their families than one would ever have imagined.

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## Table of Contents (Volume 1)

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................. 1

1.0.1 Definitions ......................................................................................... 1
1.0.2 Outcomes .......................................................................................... 1
1.0.3 Aims .................................................................................................. 2

1.1 New Zealand Literature .......................................................................... 3

1.2 International Literature .......................................................................... 4

1.2.1 Socio-Demographic Factors ............................................................... 6

1.2.1.1 Socio-Economic Status ................................................................. 7
1.2.1.2 Maternal Education ..................................................................... 8
1.2.1.3 Marital Status ............................................................................. 9

1.2.2 Maternal Life Style Factors ............................................................... 10

1.2.2.1 Tobacco Smoking ...................................................................... 10
1.2.2.2 Marijuana Usage ....................................................................... 12
1.2.2.3 Narcotics and Other Drugs ......................................................... 13
1.2.2.4 Caffeine Consumption ................................................................. 13
1.2.2.5 Alcohol Consumption ................................................................. 15

1.2.3 Genetic Factors .................................................................................. 16

1.2.3.1 Infant Sex .................................................................................. 16
1.2.3.2 Ethnicity .................................................................................... 17
1.2.3.3 Maternal Height ......................................................................... 19
1.2.3.4 Maternal Pre-pregnancy Weight .................................................. 20
1.2.3.5 Maternal Body Mass Index (BMI) and weight for height .......... 22

1.2.4 Obstetric Factors .............................................................................. 23

1.2.4.1 Maternal age .............................................................................. 23
1.2.4.2 Maternal Hypertension ................................................................. 24
1.2.4.3 Maternal Psychological Factors .................................................. 25
1.2.4.4 Sexual Activity
1.2.4.5 Genital Tract Infections
1.2.4.6 Urinary Tract Infections
1.2.4.7 Antenatal Care
1.2.4.8 Antepartum Haemorrhage
1.2.4.9 Inter-Pregnancy Interval
1.2.4.10 Parity
1.2.4.11 Previous preterm, IUGR, LBW or SGA infants
1.2.4.12 Previous Spontaneous Abortion
1.2.4.13 Previous Induced Abortion
1.2.4.14 Previous Neonatal Death/Stillbirth
1.2.4.15 Prior Infertility and In-vitro Fertilisation

1.2.5 Nutritional Factors
1.2.5.1 Maternal Weight Gain
1.2.5.2 Caloric Intake
1.2.5.3 Protein Intake and Status
1.2.5.4 Iron and Anaemia
1.2.5.5 Zinc and Copper
1.2.5.6 Other Vitamins and Minerals
1.2.5.7 Energy Expenditure, Work, and Physical Activity

1.3 Causal Pathways Relating Intrauterine Growth Retardation to Placental Function

1.3.1 Effects of Various Factors on Fetal and Placental Growth
1.3.2 Maternal Nutrition
1.3.3 Smoking
1.3.4 Exercise
1.3.5 Summary

1.4 Relations Between Placental Weight, Birthweight and Disease in Adult Life

1.4.1 Background
5.4.2 Urinary Tract Infection

5.4.3 Antenatal Care

5.4.4 Multiple Birth

5.4.5 Parity

Chapter 6: Multivariate Analysis of the National Study

6.1 Partial Models

6.1.1 Socio-demographic Variables

6.1.1.1 Socio-economic Status

6.1.1.2 Maternal Education

6.1.1.3 Marital Status

6.1.1.4 Maternal Social Support

6.1.2 Maternal Lifestyle Factors

6.1.2.1 Maternal Smoking

6.1.2.2 Maternal Marijuana Use

6.1.2.3 Maternal Alcohol Consumption in First Trimester

6.1.2.4 Maternal Caffeine Consumption in First Trimester

6.1.3 Genetic Factors

6.1.3.1 Ethnic Group

6.1.3.2 Maternal Height

6.1.3.3 Maternal Weight

6.1.3.4 Maternal Body Mass Index

6.1.4 Obstetric Variables

6.1.4.1 Maternal Age

6.1.4.2 Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)

6.1.4.3 Antenatal Care

6.1.4.4 Multiple Birth

6.1.4.5 Parity
7.5 Obstetric Related Variables

7.5.1 Maternal Age
7.5.2 Paternal Age
7.5.3 Antenatal Admissions
7.5.4 Ultrasounds
7.5.5 Maternal Antenatal Visits
7.5.6 Blood Pressure During Pregnancy
7.5.7 Maternal Haemoglobin During Pregnancy
7.5.8 Multiple Pregnancies
7.5.9 Previous Live Births (Parity)
7.5.10 Previous Miscarriages and Induced Abortions
7.5.11 Previous Low Birthweight Infant
7.5.12 Previous Caesarean Section
7.5.13 Inter-birth Interval

7.6 Nutrition and Work in Pregnancy

7.6.1 Maternal Work During Pregnancy
7.6.2 Maternal Weight Gain in Pregnancy

7.7 Distribution of Observations with Missing Variables

Chapter 8: Multivariate Analysis of National Womens Hospital Dataset

8.1 Effects of Smoking Adjusting for Ethnicity

8.1.1 Smoking Prior to and During Pregnancy

8.2 Multivariate Model for Below the 3rd Percentile

8.2.1 Full Model and Model Reduction
8.2.2 Full Model with Additional Variables

8.3 Multivariate Model for the 3rd Percentile to Below the 10th Percentile

8.3.1 Full Model and Model Reduction
I

10.4.5 Obstetric Factors ___________________________________________ 175
10.4.6 Nutritional Factors __________________________________________ 176
10.4.7 Summary _________________________________________________ 176

Chapter 11: Discussion ___________________________________________ 178

11.1 Definition of Percentile Curves and Small for Gestational Age ____________________________ 178
11.2 Discussion of Appropriateness of Q-Q Plots. ______________________ 179
11.3 Discussion of Consistency of Results Between Binary and Continuous Response __________ 180
11.4 Discussion of Variables and Relation to Outcomes ________________ 181
11.5 Placental Relations ___________________________________________ 188
11.6 Future Research Directions ____________________________________ 189
11.7 Conclusions ________________________________________________ 190
11.8 Final Overview ______________________________________________ 190

Bibliography _____________________________________________________ 192

Appendix A: Programs to Create Q-Q Plots ____________________________ 216
   Program 1 _____________________________________________________ 216
   Program 2 _____________________________________________________ 218
   Program 3 _____________________________________________________ 219

Appendix B: Example of SAS Program for Logistic Regression __________ 221

Appendix C: Example of SAS Program for Linear Regression __________ 222

Appendix D: Example Program of Standardisation and Cluster Analysis __________ 223
Abbreviations used in this thesis

e.g. example
g grams
i.e. that is
kcal kilo calories
lb pounds
mm millimetres
s.d. standard deviation
s.e. standard error
AGA Appropriate for Gestational Age
BMI Body Mass Index
Hb Haemoglobin
Hg mercury
Ht Haematocrit
ICD International Classification of Diseases
IQR Inter Quartile Range
IUGR Intra Uterine Growth Retardation
LBW Low Birth Weight
LQ Lower Quartile
MCV Mean Cell Value
MN Mononuclear
MSSI Maternal Social Support System
NWH National Womens Hospital
NHSS National Health Statistical Services
NZCDS New Zealand Cot Death Study
OR Odds Ratio
PAR Population Attributable Risk
PMN Polymorphonuclear
RDS Respiratory Distress Syndrome
RR Relative Risk
SAS Statistical Analysis System
SES Socio Economic Status
SIDS Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (cot death)
SGA Small for Gestational Age