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Neonatal Screening of Sickle Cell Disease and Inherited Diseases: A Review

Nilly Eissa albahhar[1], Nariman Essa Albahar[2], Fatima Adnan Alsadah[2], Zainab Ali AlDhneem[2], Maryam Mohammad Al Qassab[3], Shatha Saeed Alsadah[4], Bayan Ali Al Dhneem[5] , Fatima Saleh Almahdi[2], Zainab Ali Alobidi [4], Hessa Khalid Abdullah Abduallhadi [4], Zahra Ali A Al Megren[6], Amna abdullh al shafei[4], Zahra Hassan Alhashim [7], Fatima matar Alhamdan [7],Doaa Ibrahim Almukhtar[8]

1.Edama Health Center, Saudi Arabia.
2.Safwan health center, Saudi Arabia.
Safwan health center, Saudi Arabia.
3.Safwa General hospital, Saudi Arabia.
4.Dammam Medical Complex, Saudi Arabia.
5.Qatif Central Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
6.Jubail general hospital, Saudi Arabia.
Dammam medical complex, Saudi Arabia.
7.Dhahran long term care hospital, Saudi Arabia.
8.Al jamaeen Health center, Saudi Arabia.

ABSTRACT

Neonatal screening for sickle cell disease (SCD) and other inherited disorders has become an essential component of newborn health care in many countries. Early detection through neonatal screening enables timely interventions, which can significantly improve health outcomes and reduce mortality associated with genetic disorders. This review discusses the importance of neonatal screening for SCD and other inherited diseases, the methodologies involved, and the current global practices. Additionally, challenges such as cost, infrastructure, and ethical considerations in implementing widespread neonatal screening are explored.

Keywords: Neonatal Screening of Sickle Cell Disease , Inherited Diseases, health outcomes, genetic disorders.

Introduction

Inherited disorders such as sickle cell disease, cystic fibrosis, and metabolic diseases have significant implications for health if not managed early in life. Sickle cell disease, in particular, is a life-threatening condition with a high prevalence in specific populations, especially among people of African, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern descent. Neonatal screening for these disorders has become increasingly common worldwide, as early diagnosis facilitates early treatment, potentially improving quality of life and reducing complications. This review aims to examine the current practices, challenges, and advancements in neonatal screening for inherited diseases.

1. Importance of Neonatal Screening

- **Early Diagnosis and Intervention** Neonatal screening allows for early detection of genetic and metabolic disorders before symptoms manifest. In the case of SCD, early intervention such as penicillin prophylaxis, vaccination, and parent education—can reduce morbidity and mortality. Studies indicate that early diagnosis and management can prevent complications such as severe infections and splenic sequestration in children with SCD (1,2).

- **Improved Health Outcomes** Early detection and treatment of inherited diseases can significantly improve long-term health outcomes. For instance, early dietary modifications in infants diagnosed with phenylketonuria (PKU) can prevent intellectual disability. Similarly, in SCD, prophylactic measures and monitoring reduce the risk of life-threatening complications (3).

- **Cost-effectiveness** Neonatal screening for inherited diseases is considered cost-effective in many countries. Early diagnosis reduces the need for costly treatments and hospitalizations by preventing severe complications. A study suggests that neonatal screening for SCD, despite the initial costs, leads to significant long-term healthcare savings(4).

2. Screening Methods

- **Blood Spot Testing** Blood spot testing, or the heel-prick test, is the most commonly used method for neonatal screening. A small sample of blood is collected on a filter paper and tested for a range of disorders, including SCD, PKU, and cystic fibrosis. This method is widely used because it is non-invasive, cost-effective, and allows for multiple tests on a single sample.

- **Genetic Testing** Advances in genetic testing have expanded the scope of neonatal screening. By identifying specific genetic mutations associated with diseases, genetic testing can detect carriers and distinguish between different forms of inherited diseases. This approach is particularly useful for identifying sickle cell traits, as well as diagnosing other hemoglobinopathies (5).

- **Point-of-Care Testing** Point-of-care testing enables immediate diagnosis of SCD, especially in areas with limited laboratory infrastructure. Portable devices that provide rapid results are being developed and tested in low-resource settings. These devices are particularly beneficial in regions with high SCD prevalence but limited access to laboratory facilities (6).

3. Global Practices in Neonatal Screening

- **High-Income Countries** In high-income countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, neonatal screening for SCD and other inherited disorders is mandatory and widely implemented. In the U.S., the Sickle Cell Disease Association recommends universal screening for all newborns, which has been in practice since the late 1980s. Universal screening programs have been shown to improve outcomes and reduce health disparities associated with genetic diseases (7).

- **Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)** In LMICs, neonatal screening is often limited by financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of trained personnel. However, pilot programs in countries with high SCD prevalence, such as Nigeria and Ghana, have

demonstrated the feasibility of neonatal screening. For example, a pilot screening program in Ghana identified over 10,000 cases of SCD within the first five years (Ohene-Frempong et al., 2018).

- **Ethnic-Specific Screening** Some countries target screening based on population risk, focusing on ethnic groups with a higher prevalence of certain inherited diseases. For example, Greece and Cyprus screen only populations with a high prevalence of thalassemia. Ethnic-specific screening may be a cost-effective strategy in countries with limited resources but diverse populations (8)

4. Challenges in Neonatal Screening

- **Cost and Infrastructure** The implementation of widespread neonatal screening is costly, particularly in LMICs. Establishing the necessary infrastructure, including laboratories and transportation systems for samples, is challenging. Financial support from governments and international organizations is often needed to ensure sustainable screening programs..

- **Ethical and Legal Issues** Ethical concerns, such as informed consent and the potential for genetic discrimination, pose challenges in implementing neonatal screening. Some parents may be hesitant to screen for genetic disorders due to concerns about stigma or the implications of knowing their child's genetic status .

- **Follow-Up and Treatment Accessibility** Screening alone is insufficient without follow-up care and treatment. In many LMICs, newborns diagnosed with SCD or other genetic disorders face barriers to accessing appropriate healthcare. Limited availability of medications, such as hydroxyurea, and lack of specialized care contribute to poor health outcomes despite screening .

5. Recent Advances and Future Directions

- **Newborn Genome Sequencing** Advances in genome sequencing have the potential to expand the scope of neonatal screening by allowing comprehensive analysis of an infant's genetic information. Although still in its infancy, newborn genome sequencing could identify a broader range of inherited diseases and improve personalized medicine approaches (9).

- **Integration of Digital Health Technologies** Digital health technologies, including electronic health records and mobile applications, are improving the efficiency of neonatal screening programs. These technologies enable tracking of test results, facilitate follow-up care, and improve data management. In low-resource settings, mobile health applications can support healthcare workers in delivering screening and follow-up services.(9)

- **Global Partnerships and Funding** International partnerships and funding initiatives, such as those from the WHO and the Gates Foundation, are critical in supporting neonatal screening programs in LMICs. These initiatives provide technical and financial assistance, helping countries develop sustainable screening programs and improve healthcare infrastructure .

Conclusion

Neonatal screening for SCD and other inherited diseases has proven to be a life-saving intervention, improving health outcomes and reducing mortality in affected populations. While high-income countries have well-established screening programs, LMICs face significant challenges in implementing similar initiatives. Advances in technology, along with increased global support, offer hope for expanding neonatal screening in resource-limited settings. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts, including investment in healthcare infrastructure, education for healthcare workers, and ethical considerations for genetic testing.

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