



## Importance of Proper Referral in Obstetrics

**Savita Rani Singhal\*, Shuchita Dahiya and Alisha Goyal**

*Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pt. B. D. Sharma, PGIMS, ROHTAK, Haryana, India*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Savita Rani Singhal, Senior Professor and Unit Head, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pt. B. D. Sharma, PGIMS, ROHTAK, Haryana, India.

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Motherhood is a boon of nature and delivery is the most crucial event in a women's life where a mother is re-born along with her baby. Prevention of maternal mortality is one of our prime goals to provide safety to motherhood and to avoid loss to the family, society, and the nation [1].

Although, India has come a long way in improving maternal health as evident from significant decline in maternal mortality ratio (MMR) from 130 in 2014–2016 to 113 in 2016–2018 [2]. This has been possible after implementation of various health programs such as Janani Suraksha Yojana, ambulance services, and Janani Shishu Suraksha Karayakram. The World Health Organization reports that about 800 women die from pregnancy and birth related complications around the world every day [3]. Approximately one-quarter of all the pregnancy and delivery-related maternal deaths worldwide occurs in India, which has the highest burden of maternal mortality for any single country [4,5]. One of the possible reasons could be poor functioning of referral system in the country. Referral system is an essential component of any health-care system. The World Health Organization estimates that at least 88-98% of maternal deaths can be averted with timely access to emergency obstetrics care services using efficient referral system [6].

A referral can be defined as a process in which a health care worker at one level of the health system, having insufficient resources (drugs/equipment/skills) to manage a clinical condition, seeks the assistance of a better or differently resourced facility at higher level to assist in, or take over the management of the client's case [7].

Referral system plays a vital role in management of diseases in any healthcare system. One of the major aim of referral system is to make cost effective utilization of health care. Hence it ensures better quality of care at all levels, if it is functioning properly [8]. A good referral system should have following characteristics-

- Patients should be given optimal care at the right level, right time and right cost
- Optimal and cost-efficient utilization of health care systems
- Optimal and appropriate utilization of specialist services for needy persons

Optimal utilization of primary health care services [9].

The various levels of health care system include [10]:

Primary health care-

- Sub Centre.
- Primary Health Centre.

Secondary health care-

- Community Health Centre
- District Hospital.

Tertiary health care-

- Medical colleges.
- Regional Centres.

Major causes of obstetric referral to a tertiary care centre includes preterm labour, preeclampsia, eclampsia, previous LSCS, Rh negative blood group pregnancy, antepartum haemorrhage, postpartum haemorrhage and sometimes due to lack of manual resources [10].

Challenges encountered in the referral process which affect the quality of care includes- referral transportation system, referrer-receiver communication barriers, inadequate infrastructure and supplies and insufficient health personnel. Some highlights of the problem includes inadequate use of ambulance services, poor management of patients during transit, lack of professional escort, unannounced emergency referrals, lack of adequate information and feedback and limited supply of beds, drugs and blood [11].

Although, the best mode of transportation is the ambulance, however for various reasons, primarily the limited availability of ambulances and finances, many of the patients arrive in taxis or private cars. Transporting patients during emergency transfers in ambulances help to ensure continuity of care as paramedics are available and able to monitor and provide necessary first aid to help stabilize patient's condition before they arrive at the referred facility. Carrying patients in inappropriate transports compromise on these interventions and the safety of patients thereof leading to poor management of patients during transit. Once at the hospital, the patients or their escorts (relatives or health professionals) are expected to present their referral forms. These forms contain a summary of the patient's personal data, a little medical history, diagnosis, and treatments given. However, it has been observed that though most patients come with referral letters sometimes the information provided by the referring facilities are inadequate. There is Poor communication between referral-receiving hospitals, and poor feedback to referring hospital after the patient has been treated. The limited number of beds had a negative influence on their ability to attend to patients and to refer them to other hospital which delay the treatment and exacerbate the situation of patient [11].

Access to appropriate health care including skilled birth attendants at delivery and timely referrals to access emergency obstetric care services can greatly reduce maternal deaths and disabilities [12,13]. Timely access to emergency obstetric care is seen as crucial to avert any negative outcome that could result from unpredictable complications that could arise during pregnancy

and childbirth. Timely access to emergency care is thus seen as an indicator of a successful health system.

Effective referral services are central to a program like the JSY, which aims to provide EmOC care to save lives. It is known that reductions in maternal mortality and morbidity are not possible without an effective referral system for obstetric complications. Obstetric complications are unpredictable and offer a short time window to start medical care, failing which they can be fatal. The capacity of different tiers of public sector health facilities (that are all also JSY institutions) to function as EmONC facilities is varied, with some being competent comprehensive emergency obstetric and newborn care (CEmONC) facilities, while others function at less than Basic EmONC (BEmONC) levels. Given this variation, it is all the more important that an effective referral system is in place to facilitate effective first line management at the first facility that a mother attends, and efficient transfer to more comprehensive care facilities when complications may necessitate this [14].

Currently, Global attention has shifted to emergency obstetric care and skilled care at birth as essential strategies to reduce maternal deaths [9,10]. Although, it remains an essential component in improving maternal and newborn health and wellbeing [14,15].

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