# Maternal Mortality Related to Anesthesia: Can It be Prevented?

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#### Abstract:

Background: Maternal mortality is still a problem in developing countries like Thailand. However calculating the maternal mortality rate (MMR) from death certificates might underreport as in other parts of the world. Anesthesia has never been included as a cause of maternal death in Thailand. The objective of this study was to investigate the maternal mortality rate and the causes of maternal death and to see if there is any correlation between the maternal death and anesthetic practice.

Methods: Questionnaires were sent to the directors of 800 public hospitals all over Thailand asking for information in the year 2000. The results were then compared with the information obtained in the same

way 12 years ago (1988).

Results: From 498 out of 800 hospitals (62%) that sent the questionnaires back, which included 358,481 births and 94 maternal deaths in the year 2000. This 62% response was then compared with 89% response in 1988. The MMR was decreased from 31.4:100,000 in 1988 to 26: 100,000 in 2000. The six leading causes of maternal death were hemorrhage, embolism, preeclampsia, AIDS, sepsis and anesthesia in 2000. In 1988, anesthesia was also the sixth leading cause of maternal death. General anesthesia was still the most frequent choice of anesthesia for cesarean section (70-75%), without the prophylactic use of 0.3 M sodium citrate and spinal anesthesia was used in only 24-27% in both periods. This due to anesthetic service in Thailand is mainly done by nurse anesthetists who are not allowed to give regional anesthesia. Removal of placenta using a mask anesthetic technique which has an aspiration risk was still used in some hospitals. The causes of deaths were all from general anesthesia, and were the result of difficult intubation and aspiration while there were no death as a result of using spinal anesthesia. In developed countries, spinal anesthesia is the major choice of anesthesia for cesarean section.

Conclusions: The MMR in Thailand is still high and some causes are preventable. Health care providers should pay attention and try to reduce it. Anesthesia is the sixth leading cause of maternal death mostly due to difficult intubation and aspiration during using general anesthesia for cesarean section. However the use of general anesthesia for cesarean section in Thailand is still high. To reduce the maternal mortality from anesthesia, spinal anesthesia should be promoted. If general anesthesia is needed, standard techniques

to prevent pulmonary aspiration should be used.

เรื่องย่อ :

สาเหตุตายของมารดาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการระงับความรู้สึก : จะสามารถป้องกันได้หรือไม่? ชูศรี พิศลยบุตร พ.บ.\*

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ความรู้พื้นฐาน: การตายของมารดาในระยะแรกคลอดยังเป็นปัญหาสำคัญของประเทศกำลัง พัฒนาเช่นประเทศไทย อย่างไรก็ตามจำนวนและสาเหตุตายที่ได้จากใบมรณะบัตรอาจต่ำกว่าความเป็นจริงเช่นเดียว กับหลาย ๆ ประเทศทั่วโลก การให้ยาระงับความรู้สึกไม่เคยถูกรวมอยู่ในสาเหตุตายของมารดาในประเทศไทย จุดประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้เพื่อทราบอัตราและสาเหตุตายของมารดากับการระงับความรู้สึกว่ามีความเกี่ยวข้องกัน หรือไม่

วิธีการศึกษา: โดยการส่งแบบสอบถามทางไปรษณีย์ไปยังผู้อำนวยการโรงพยาบาลในสังกัด กระทรวงสาธารณสุขทั่วประเทศไทยจำนวน 800 แห่ง เพื่อถามข้อมูลในปี 2543 จากนั้นนำมาเปรียบเทียบกับข้อมูล ที่ได้โดยวิธีเดียวกันเมื่อ 12 ปีก่อน (ปี 2531)

ผลการศึกษา: จากการตอบกลับจากโรงพยาบาลสาธารณสุข 498 แห่งจาก 800 แห่ง (62%) ซึ่งครอบคลุมการคลอด 348,581 รายและมารดาตาย 94 ราย ได้นำมาเปรียบเทียบกับการตอบกลับจำนวน 89% ในปี 2531 พบว่าอัตราตายของมารดาลดลงจาก 31.4: 100,000 ในปี 2531 เป็น 26:100,000 ในปี 2543 สาเหตุการตาย ห้าอันดับแรกคือ การเสียเลือด, embolism ภาวะครรภ์เป็นพิษ, AIDS, การติดเชื้อและอันดับหกคือการระงับความรู้สึก เช่นเดียวกับปี 2531 ที่การระงับความรู้สึกเป็นสาเหตุตายอันดับหก การใช้ยาดมสลบยังคงถูกใช้บ่อยที่สุดเพื่อการ ผ่าตัดคลอด (70-75%) โดยไม่มีการให้ 0.3 โมลาร์ โซเดียมซิเตรท และการใช้ยาซาทาง spinal มีเพียง 24-27% ใน ทั้งสองช่วงระยะเวลา ทั้งนี้เนื่องจากการระงับความรู้สึกเพื่อการผ่าตัดในประเทศไทยส่วนใหญ่ทำโดยวิลัญญีพยาบาล ซึ่งไม่ได้รับอนุญาตให้ใช้ยาซาทาง spinal และการล้วงรกโดยใช้วิธี undermask ซึ่งมีโอกาสเสี่ยงต่อการสำลัก น้ำย่อยเข้าปอดยังคงมีอยู่ในหลายโรงพยาบาล ซึ่งก็พบว่าสาเหตุตายจากการให้ยาระงับความรู้สึกทั้งหมดเกิดจาก การใส่ท่อช่วยหายใจลำบากและการลำลักน้ำย่อยเข้าปอด แต่ไม่มีสาเหตุตายจากการใช้ยาซาทาง spinal ซึ่งใน ประเทศที่พัฒนาแล้วส่วนใหญ่ใช้การฉีดยาซาทาง spinal เพื่อการผ่าตัดคลอด

สรุป: อัตราตายของมารดายังอยู่ในเกณฑ์สูงและบางสาเหตุสามารถป้องกันได้ซึ่งผู้กำหนด นโยบายสาธารณสุขควรให้ความสำคัญและหาทางป้องกันแก้ไขในเรื่องนี้ สำหรับการระงับความรู้สึกซึ่งเป็นสาเหตุ การตายอันดับหกมีสาเหตุเนื่องจากการใส่ท่อช่วยหายใจลำบากและสำลักน้ำย่อยเข้าปอดขณะดมยาสลบ ดังนั้น อัตราตายจากการให้ยาระงับรู้สึกอาจลดลงได้ถ้าเปลี่ยนมาใช้การฉีดยาชามากขึ้น และในกรณีจำเป็นต้องใช้ยาดม สลบ ควรป้องกันอันตรายจากการสำลักอาหารด้วย

#### INTRODUCTION

In the new millennium, maternal mortality has come to be recognized as a leading development indicator, replacing financial indicators such as gross national product that were used during the 20th century. Unfortunately, Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) might be underreported. Even in the United States, the MMR reported by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been claimed to be stable at 7.5:100,000 since 1982. However, the numbers which are calculated from death certificates

are inaccurate in the way as 75% of cases<sup>3</sup>. Panchal, et al<sup>4</sup> studied MMR (1984-1997) using the hospital database and found that the estimate MMR was 16.4:100,000 which is closed to the 22.8:100,000 obtained in a study using a peer review process in an urban perinatal center (1992-1998).<sup>5</sup> These numbers show that the MMR reported by the CDC (7.5:100,000) to be 60-70% underreported.

Thailand as a developing country, with its 61 million population and 700-800 thousands live births annually, still has a problem with a high

RESULTS

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maternal mortality. If we look at the annual MMR reported by the Registration Administration Bureau, Ministry of Interior which is also obtained from death certificate; we would probably obtain an under report MMR. For example, the MMRs were 16:100,000 and 13.2:100,000 in 1988 and the year 2000 respectively. From the study of Berg, et al6 anesthesia was the 6th leading cause of maternal death in the United States. Hawkins, et al7, also found that the estimated rate of maternal death from complication of general anesthesia during cesarean section increased from 20.0 per million general anesthetics in 1979-1984 to 32.2 deaths per million in 1985-1990. In contrast, the estimated rate of death from complications of regional anesthesia during cesarean section decreased from 8.6 per million regional anesthetics in 1979-1984 to 1.9 per million in 1985-1990. These mean the case fatality rate from general anesthesia which was 2.3 times that for regional anesthesia in 1979-1984, increased to 16.7 times that for regional anesthesia in 1985-1990. That might be the reason why Hawkins, et al8, found that in 1981, with a cesarean section rate of 19%, general anesthesia and regional anesthesia for cesarean section were used in 41 and 55% respectively. In contrast, cesarean section rate in 1991 which was 24%, general anesthesia was used in only 16% and regional anesthesia was used in 84% of all cesarean sections.

The objective of this study was to estimate the MMR, and the causes of maternal death. If anesthesia is one of the leading causes of death, is there any correlation between anesthetic practice and maternal mortality?

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The questionnaires were sent to the directors of all 800 public hospitals in Thailand asking about the total number of deliveries, cesarean sections, and the total number and causes of maternal death in 2000. Choices, complications, and techniques of anesthesia for cesarean section and placental removal were also sought. The results was then compared to the previous results with were obtained by sending the same questionnaires to all public hospitals in 1988.

From the questionnaires which were sent back from 498 out of 800 hospitals (62%) included 358,481 birth and 94 maternal deaths with as MMR of 26:100,000 (Table 1). The six leading causes of maternal death were hemorrhage, embolism, severe preeclampsia, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), sepsis and anesthesia respectively. The cesarean section rate had increased from 11% in 1988 to 18%. (Table 2). However, the choice of anesthesia had not changed very much during the 12 years period. General, spinal and epidural anesthesia were used at 75.5%, 23.9% and 0.6% in 2000 as compared with 71%, 27% and 2% in 1988 respectively. All four cases of maternal death from anesthesia occurred using general anesthesia (difficult intubation & aspiration) with no maternal mortality as a result of regional anesthesia in 2000 as compared with 2 cases of maternal death from general anesthesia and 2 cases from regional anesthesia in 1988 (Table 3). While a rapid sequence induction technique for general anesthesia was claimed to be used in all hospitals, almost no hospital used prophylactic 0.3 Molar sodium citrate 30 ml before induction of anesthesia. Ketamine, meperidine with diazepam, only diazepam, under mask and endotracheal anesthetic techniques were used for removal of placenta in 39%, 29%, 13%, 11% and 8% cases respectively in 2000. Unfortunately data concerning anesthetic techniques was not collected in 1988 for comparison (Table 4).

#### DISCUSSION

The total number of live births in 2000 was 873,482, and the questionnaire's response included 358,481 which is only 41% of all delivery in Thailand for that year. The missing data included deliveries in university hospitals, private hospitals, small health care centers, home and some public hospitals which did not return the questionnaires. This might have caused the MMR in 2000 in this report to be 26: 100,000 while the MMRs of the whole country reported by the Bureau of health Promotion, Department of Health, Ministry of Public Health in 1997 and 1998 were 36.5: 100,000 and 36.4: 100,000 respectively. This means that the MMR in Thailand

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Table 1. Causes of maternal mortality by questionnaire surveys of the public hospitals (response rate 498 out of 800 (62%)).

Year	2000 (2543)	1988 (2531)
Total live births in Thailand	873,482	773,009
MM/live births	94/358,481	70/222,735
MMR	26: 100,000	31.4:100,000
Hemorrhage	35 (37.2%)	28 (40.0%)
Embolism	12 (11.7%)	7 (10%)
Severe preeclampsia	10 (10.6%)	15 (21%)
AIDS	10 (10.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Sepsis		8 (11.0%)
Anesthesia	4 (4.2%)	4 (5.7%)
Heart disease	3 (3.1%)	5 (7.1%)
Others	12(11.7%)	3 (4.2%)

MM = Maternal Mortality

MMR = Maternal Mortality Rate

Table 2. Choices of anesthesia for cesarean section..

Year	2000 (2543)	1988 (2531)
Cesarean section rate (%)	18	11.14
General anesthesia (%)	75.5	71
Spinal anesthesia (%)	23.9	27
Epidural anesthesia (%)	0.6	yland 2 2 manager of f

Table 3. Maternal complications from anesthesia.

	1988		2000	
	Total	Death	Total	Death
spiration	5	1	61	mingrom and
Difficult intubation	1	1	9	3
High block	NA	1	170	0
Total block	NA	1	8	0

NA = Not available

## สาเหตุตายของมารดาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการระจับความรู้สึก: จะสามารถป้องกันได้หรือไม่?

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Table 4. Choices of anesthesia for removal of placenta.

men's believe whilese by to which	2000 (2543)	
Ketamine (%)	39 Sections 39	wench went hamouthage, embolin
Meperidine + diazepam (%)	29	
Meperidine or diazepam (%)	Draw strooms 13	
Under mask (%)	oc foreign	
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Table 5. MMR in different parts of the world.

	UK*	USA**	Japan***	Thailand****	West Africa****
Year	1994-1996	1985-1998	1991-1992	1998	1994-1996
MMR/100,000	110	16.4	9.5	36.4	331

<sup>\*</sup>Swiet M, et al. Am J Obstet Gynecol 2000; 182: 760-66.

Table 6. Causes of maternal death in the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom and Thailand.

USA* 1987-1990	Japan** 1991-1992	UK*** 1994-1996	Thailand**** 1997-1998	Thailand***** 2000
Hemorrhage	Hemorrhage	Hemorrhage	Hemorrhage	Hemorrhage
Embolism	Hypertension	Ectopic	AIDS/sepsis	Embolism
Hypertension	Embolism	Hypertension	Hypertension	Hypertension
Sepsis	Sepsis	Sepsis	Embolism	AIDS

<sup>\*</sup>Berg CJ, et al. Obstet Gynecol 1996; 88: 161-67.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Berg CJ, et al. Obstet Gynecol 1996; 88: 161-67.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Nagaya K, et al. JAMA 2000; 283: 2661-67.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>Kanchana S, et al. Bureau of Health Promotion, Department of Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand 2002.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>Bouvier-Colle MH, et al. Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand 2001; 80: 111-9.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Nagaya K, et al. JAMA 2000; 283: 2661-67.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Swiet M, et al. Am J Obstet Gynecol 2000, 182: 760-66.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>Kanchana S, et al. Bureau of Health Promotion, Department of Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand 2002.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>This study

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is higher than the MMR in developed countries like the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (USA), and Japan (Table 5).

The 3 leading causes of maternal death which were hemorrhage, embolism, and hypertension were similar to the causes of maternal death in the USA and UK. (Table 6).

Since most causes of maternal mortality are preventable, creating a functioning health system that can provide good health services, referral services and community services should help reduce maternal mortality.<sup>10</sup>

Anesthesia was the 6th leading cause of maternal death in Thailand (Table 1). From the study of Berg, et al6 anesthesia was also the 6th leading cause of maternal death which involved 5% of all maternal deaths. All 4 maternal deaths from anesthesia in 2000 were from difficult intubation and aspiration. Although we found that general anesthesia is seem risky than spinal anesthesia, but general anesthesia was still used more (71-75%) than spinal anesthesia (24-27%) in Thailand. (Table 2). This is contrast to the USA that general anesthesia was used only 17% while spinal and epidural anesthesia were used in 40% and 44% for cesarean section.8 Due to depletion of anesthesiologists, anesthesia service in Thailand is mostly done by nurse anesthetists who do not allow to use regional anesthesia. Since spinal anesthesia is less risky, easy and effective technique for cesarean section, the regulation or policy should be reconsidered. We also found that the standard technique of using a prophylactic antacid such as 0.3 molar sodium citrate orally before induction of anesthesia was not used including the situation of mask technique which is risky for pulmonary aspiration that was used for removal of the placenta. To find the real causes of death from anesthesia is not easy. Hawkins and Birnbach11 have stated that sometimes we do not know how many deaths occurred because the patient was

ill prepared for either surgery or anesthesia. Likewise, if a failed intubation occurred, was there a laryngeal mask, combitube, or jet ventilator available? Was the algorithm for failed intubation followed? If cardiac arrest occurred, was the appropriate resuscitative equipment available? In addition, if a patient with placenta previa dies during an elective repeated cesarean section as a result of uncontrolled bleeding at a weekend or during the night with one junior faculty who did not have blood products or back up available. A recent study has reported that the increased numbers of preventable maternal deaths in Japan were attributed to one physician functioning as both the obstetrician and anesthesiologist. 12

#### CONCLUSION

Since the MMR in Thailand is still high, health care providers should give attention to the recent, accurate data on maternal mortality and try to reduce maternal mortality rate especially from preventable causes.

Since maternal death from anesthesia was due to difficult intubation and aspiration, encouraging greater use of regional anesthesia for cesarean section and to improve the safety of technique of general anesthesia in those patients who still require general anesthesia for cesarean section and removal of placenta might decrease the maternal mortality rate from anesthesia.

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