Press Release

Issue date 19 July 2007

Newborn babies screened for Cystic Fibrosis

RUH paediatricians are delighted that all newborn babies in the Bath health community will now be screened for Cystic Fibrosis (CF) when they are between five and eight days old.

Blood spot screening is offered for newborns in the first week after birth. A few spots of blood collected by the midwife from a heel prick test are used to screen for Cystic Fibrosis (CF). At the same time the babies are also tested for an underactive thyroid gland, disorders of haemoglobin and a metabolic condition called phenylketonuria.

Most babies screened will not have any of the conditions but, for the small numbers who do, the benefits of screening are enormous. Early treatment can improve their health and prevent severe disability or even death.

This nationwide screening programme was introduced by the Department of Health in 2001 and all NHS organisations in the country are required to introduce newborn CF screening by July 2007.

Jenny Tyrrell, consultant paediatrician at the RUH, says: “We are absolutely delighted that CF screening is now being funded by the local primary care trusts. Finding out if a baby has CF at birth will give us the best possibility of preventing lung damage by starting treatment early

“Cystic Fibrosis is a serious condition that affects about 1 in every 2500 babies born in this country. Affected children can have problems with chest infections and with their digestion, so that they have difficulty gaining weight. We know that it is important to start treatment for these children as soon as possible.

“The treatment involves chest physiotherapy to help keep the chest mucus moving and antibiotics to reduce infection. Babies are given supplements to help their digestion.

“Until the newborn test for this condition was developed, babies were only tested if they were ill. Some children can be ill for a long time before they receive the diagnosis and may have needed hospital treatment.

“If a baby is found to be affected, then the CF team at the RUH will contact the family and explain the diagnosis. We work closely with the CF team at Bristol children’s Hospital to ensure that the children with this condition in our area receive the best possible treatment.”

CF is a condition inherited from both parents. People who have one CF gene are completely healthy, that is one in every 25 people. If their partner also carries one CF gene, the chances of an affected baby is 1 in 4 pregnancies.

The screening picks up nearly all the affected children, but like all medical tests, cannot pick up everyone. The screen is not designed to pick up those people who are healthy carriers of the gene but it will do so occasionally.

Ends

Notes for editors:

CF is a hereditary disease affecting cells of the exocrine glands (including mucus-secreting glands, sweat glands and others). Affected individuals lack a protein that enables the transport of chloride ions across cell membranes: this results in the production of thick mucus which obstructs the intestinal glands, pancreas and bronchi. Respiratory infections, which may be severe, are a common complication.

More information is available on www.newbornscreening-bloodspot.org.uk