

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March of Dimes Birth Defects Prevention Month
January 1976

Every year more than 200,000 American babies suffer birth defects. Some of these abnormalities are relatively minor and can be corrected or treated to reduce their harmful effects. Others cause lifelong disability and limit individual fulfillment. Still others are fatal, striking in either infancy or later life. Some of these defects can be diagnosed before or immediately after birth. Others may not show up until many years later.

Nearly a quarter-million babies each year are threatened by low birthweight. Infants weighing less than five and one-half pounds are less likely to survive and develop normally. Many are born prematurely. In others, the underweight is due to abnormalities of pregnancy, including maternal malnutrition.

About one-fifth of birth defects are inherited. Another twenty percent are thought to result from environmental influences, including drugs, viral infections and radiation -- acting on the mother and fetus. The rest are caused by a combination of both factors. More than two thousand hereditary disorders have been catalogued. And the list continues to grow. The potential for environmentally induced defects increases as man-made substances enter the environment.

Many of these defects, particularly low birthweight, can be prevented if we effectively apply present knowledge and strengthen current prenatal and postnatal services. We must do so now if we are to reduce human suffering and costs to society in the future.

Continuing advances in medical technology are increasing our ability to diagnose, prevent and treat some birth disorders. Rapidly developing genetic services allow parents to gain accurate information on their chances of having children with certain heritable birth defects.

But despite two hundred years of progress in nearly every other field of human endeavor, the United States sadly ranks but eighteenth among the nations of the world in combatting infant mortality. For this reason, I call upon the American people to join with me in observing January 1976 as March of Dimes Birth Defects Prevention Month, and I salute those who have brought national attention to this critical concern. Only through the cooperation of government, voluntary agencies and the people they serve can we begin to take significant steps toward solving these problems.

I urge everyone to give special attention to efforts to prevent birth defects and lessen infant death in this country. I particularly emphasize to women of child-bearing age the importance of seeking regular medical care and maintaining good health in order to ensure the best possible outcome of pregnancy.

Let us all heed the message of March of Dimes Birth Defects Prevention Month: a healthy birthright for all babies.