apparent at birth – a highly pragmatic and effective means of saving on litigation payouts.

More practical in our setting, however, was for each hospital to agree on guidelines for submission of placentas appropriate for their setting and budget, based on internationally published and accepted guidelines. She also outlined four essential criteria needed to define an acute intrapartum event as being sufficient to cause cerebral palsy, one of these being the exclusion of any other identifiable cause, saying that this further pointed to a need for placental pathology. Placentas with decreased reserve would still function adequately, yet be unable to cope with the stress of a normal delivery, she emphasised. Among the reasons the placenta was ignored was the limited exposure students and doctors had to it during training, difficulties in terminology, interpreting findings and examination, and the dearth of qualitative studies. Another reason it had become ‘the outcast’ among pathology specimens was that ‘there are simply too many of them’. She said that some indications for placental examination would not be obvious at the time of delivery. Not only did determining the pathophysiology of an adverse pregnancy outcome help determine the timing of events in public hospitals, ‘we pay more attention to our own placentas and their role in contributing to the statistics we have in our neonatal and perinatal deaths. If we do, I think you’ll find the placenta has a great deal to contribute to reducing the shocking statistics we have.’

The SA Saving Babies 2010–2011 report puts the early perinatal mortality rate as 21/1 000 live births, with the majority of these deaths occurring in the 1 000–1 499 g weight category. Deaths due to intrapartum asphyxia are reported as being linked to healthcare provider-associated avoidable factors in 44% of cases. The top five health worker-related factors were: (i) fetal distress monitored but not detected; (ii) fetal distress not monitored and not detected; (iii) no intervention for prolonged second stage of labour; (iv) delay in referring the patient; and (v) delay in calling for expert assistance.

Wright told her doctor audience that the only time a placenta would not help them was if they were negligent. The ‘ideal’ would be to identify problems prior to delivery. Here the Doppler ultrasound scan may prove to be of great assistance in avoiding having to tell parents ‘sorry, you have a dead baby, but we can point to the cause’. She was involved in a large international study trying to correlate data on Doppler ultrasound use v. placental pathology, and added: ‘In SA we are in the early stages of identifying our problems, but there is much more we can do.’

‘I believe when a baby is compromised, everybody is the loser – the baby, the obstetrician, the neonatologist and the parents. Sometimes the best you can do is sit down with the parents and say we looked at everything we could, there was a natural cause for it. If you don’t have an answer for them, they will take you to court – they’re angry. But if you can truly say it was nobody’s fault, that nature can be cruel, they won’t sue,’ she said.

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New editor for SA Journal of Child Health

Dr John Pettifor, new editor of the SAJCH, was until his retirement 4 years ago head of the Department of Paediatrics at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and director of the Medical Research Council (MRC) Mineral Metabolism Research Unit and the Birth to Twenty longitudinal study. He is a National Research Foundation A-rated scientist, serves on the editorial boards of a number of international bone and nutrition journals, and has received national and international research awards.

Pettifor qualified as a doctor from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1968 and then specialised in paediatrics, which he completed in 1974. In 1978/9 he spent a year as a clinical research fellow at the Shriners Hospital in Montreal with Dr Francis Glorieux studying paediatric bone diseases, the first of many to have honed their skills in paediatric metabolic bone disease at that institution. On his return to South Africa (SA) he established the Mineral Metabolism Research Unit and was appointed its director by the SA MRC in 1985, a position he held until his retirement. In 1981 he obtained the PhD (Med) for studies into the role of low dietary calcium intake in the pathogenesis of rickets in children in rural areas of SA.

Pettifor’s major research interests have focused on metabolic bone diseases in children, and in particular the roles of vitamin D and dietary calcium intake in the pathogenesis of rickets. He is currently involved in a longitudinal study of ethnic differences in bone mass in children and the factors influencing bone growth and acquisition during puberty. He has over 200 publications in accredited journals, has written 30 chapters in books, and is co-editor of the only book published internationally on paediatric bone diseases.

Pettifor is an Emeritus Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, has been appointed an Honorary Professorial Researcher in the Department of Paediatrics, and is a member of the Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit. He is also director of the Carnegie Clinician PhD Fellowship Programme in the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences.