Abstract

BACKGROUND: In sub-Saharan Africa, few services specifically address the needs of women in the first year after childbirth. By assessing the health status of women in this period, key interventions to improve maternal health could be identified. There is an underutilised opportunity to include these interventions within the package of services provided for woman-child pairs attending child-health clinics. METHODS: This needs assessment entailed a cross-sectional survey with 500 women attending a child-health clinic at the provincial hospital in Mombasa, Kenya. A structured questionnaire, clinical examination, and collection of blood, urine, cervical swabs and Pap smear were done. Women's health care needs were compared between the early (four weeks to two months after childbirth), middle (two to six months) and late periods (six to twelve months) since childbirth. RESULTS: More than one third of women had an unmet need for contraception (39%, 187/475). Compared with other time intervals, women in the late period had more general health symptoms such as abdominal pain, fever and depression, but fewer urinary or breast problems. Over 50% of women in each period had anaemia (Hb <11 g/l; 265/489), with even higher levels of anaemia in those who had a caesarean section or had not received iron supplementation during pregnancy. Bacterial vaginosis was present in 32% (141/447) of women, while 1% (5/495) had syphilis, 8% (35/454) Trichomonas vaginalis and 11% (54/496) HIV infection. CONCLUSION: Throughout the first year after childbirth, women had high levels of morbidity. Interface with health workers at child health clinics should be used for treatment of anaemia, screening and treatment of reproductive tract infections, and provision of family planning counselling and contraception. Providing these services during visits to child health clinics, which have high coverage both early and late in the year after childbirth, could make an important contribution towards improving women's health