

Medical screening society working groups

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This issue contains the first Medical Screening Society Working Group report. The topic ('The prevention of group B streptococcal disease in neonates') was chosen because this infection is the most common serious neonatal infection in Western countries. While there are a number of strategies that have been proposed for dealing with the problem, no clear consensus has emerged. The aim of the Working Group was to consider the evidence and provide guidance on whether screening should be implemented in the UK – and if so, how – or whether alternative methods of prevention should be considered.

The report distils the problem elegantly and concludes with the recommendation that the main focus for prevention should be research into primary prevention through vaccination, rather than through testing for infection and treating mothers with antibiotics at the onset of labour.

The Working Group concludes that screening in the UK could at best prevent about 36 neonatal deaths and 23 cases

of serious childhood disability per year. Vaccination could prevent 50 and 59 cases, respectively; the advantage of vaccination arises principally because it prevents infection of the infant some days after birth (horizontally transmitted infection), as well as intrapartum infection. In other words, the principal public health strategy that should be explored is primary prevention through vaccination. The report should provide a firm basis for setting up a large randomized trial.

The Medical Screening Society plans to set up additional Working Groups to consider other related screening uncertainties, not necessarily to resolve them, but to marshal the key evidence and present recommendations on how to advance the subject.

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