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NEWS IN BRIEF

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**Acute severe hepatitis of unknown origin in children**

Mystifying cases of severe acute hepatitis in children have foxed epidemiologists in the last couple of months. Of the 169 cases reported till 21 April, 2022, most of the cases were in the Europe and the USA with UK topping the list at 114 cases. Ten percent (17 children) required a liver transplant and one child died.

Strikingly, fever was uncommon though other symptoms of viral hepatitis like abdominal pain, diarrhoea, vomiting and jaundice were seen. Most had transaminase levels above 500 U/L. Children were negative for hepatitis virus A to E. An intensive search for the culprit has unearthed the Adeno virus in 74 children, SARS-CoV-2 in 20 and coinfection of SARS-CoV-2 and adenovirus in another 19.

The outbreak has engendered anxiety because such severe symptoms have not previously been documented with adeno viral infections. One thought is an increased susceptibility in children due to lack of exposure in the COVID years. The other possibilities being floated are a coinfection with SARS-CoV-2, which has aggravated the illness or a new mutated variant of adeno virus. Prior vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 is not being considered a risk factor, since that most of the affected children were not immunized.

(<https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2022-DON376> 23 April 2022; MMWR 29 April 2022)

**Guns: the leading cause of death in children in the US**

In a Kafakaesque turn of events, firearm-related deaths rapidly spiked during the early COVID pandemic to become the leading cause of death in children in the United States. There was a 33.5% rise in crude rates of firearm related homicides and 1.1% increase in firearm related suicides in 2019-2020 according to recent data released by the CDC. Prior to 2020, motor vehicle crashes were the predominant cause of death. The second dismaying data is the 83.6% rise in deaths due to drug overdose and poisoning in children making it the number four killer in

2019-2020. The other causes of death have not been much influenced. Even COVID-19 infections per se were a mere 0.2/100,000 children. The reasons need to be teased out, understood and addressed quickly. India needs to watch global trends if we want to protect our children.

(<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2201761>)

**Overturning of *Roe versus Wade*- a public health calamity**

On May 2, the media company Politico created a storm when it published the leaked papers of the first draft of a US Supreme Court judgement. In this, the plan is to overturn a previous 1973 landmark judgement in the *Roe versus Wade* case where abortion was made a constitutional right in the United States. What does this mean? This would mean that abortion laws would be completely in the hands of the State Governments in the US. In almost 22 states, abortion would be banned or extremely restricted. And it is estimated that the number of legal abortions would fall by 14%.

Based on previous judgements, currently women in the US have the right to terminate pregnancy upto the point of fetal viability, considered to be 28 weeks, but with advancing science it has been brought down to 22-24 weeks. There have been many previous attempts to make abortion more restrictive.

Huge amount of non-controvertible evidence exists that banning abortions will have dire public health and economic consequences. It is predicted that maternity related deaths will rise from 1 in 3000 to 1 in 1000 for non Hispanic black women if abortions are banned in the US. Research from economists from the University of Michigan suggests that women who are denied abortions face significantly more financial catastrophes like debt, eviction and bankruptcy than women who have access to it. Banning abortion would fly in the face of reason and wisdom and will be remembered as a black moment in history.

(<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01249-2>)

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