

Newborn Abandonment As Seen In A Tertiary Health Facility In North-Western Nigeria

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Abstract

The abandonment of children is an extreme form of child neglect. Every child has the right to be cared for by the parents. As such when a child is abandoned this right is violated. Abandoned infants are at increased risk of failure to thrive, developmental delay, decline in IQ scores, severe psychological disturbance, nosocomial infection and child abuse. This study aimed to determine the demographic characteristics of abandoned neonate admitted in the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU) of Usmanu Danfodiyo Teaching Hospital (UDUTH), Sokoto, the yearly trend and outcome of abandoned neonate admitted in the SCBU of UDUTH, Sokoto. It was a retrospective study that was conducted at SCBU of the UDUTH, Sokoto. All abandoned babies that were admitted into SCBU from 1st May, 2014 to 31st May, 2023 were included in the study; information regarding abandoned babies was obtained from the records of the Neonatal unit. Over the 9-year period of the study, 13 abandoned babies were admitted into the SCBU. Four were males and 9 were females, with a M: F of 0.3:1. Of the abandoned babies, 12(92.3%) were newborn and term. Majority 9(69.2%) of the babies were abandoned at various places in the UDUTH premises, 1(7.7%) was abandoned in the hospital labour room, while 3(23.1%) were abandoned on the streets of Sokoto state. None of the babies had any gross congenital abnormality, was HIV exposed or hepatitis B virus positive. During the hospital stay only 1(7.7%) of the abandoned newborns was claimed by the relatives, 12(92.3) of the babies were discharged to the orphanage for adoption. More female newborns than males were found abandoned in the hospital vicinity. None of the babies had any abnormality or disease that could have predisposed to abandonment. Out of wedlock birth by teenage mothers following unwanted pregnancy is among the unknown causes of child abandonment in our study. Community awareness to prevent undesired pregnancies is advocated. Government at all levels should ensure the full implementation of the Child right act.

Keywords: Newborn, abandonment, tertiary health facility, North-Western, Nigeria

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I. Introduction

Child abandonment is a distinct type of child maltreatment referring to a situation where a child is intentionally left behind, publicly, secretly or in an unsuitable setting by a parent who has no intention of returning (Marici *et al*, 2023; Sattarova *et al*, 2023). The secret child abandonment can be performed in a safe place with parent's intention that the child will be rescued, it can also be performed with the intention of killing the child (infanticide) whereby the child is dumped in an unsafe place (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012). The abandonment of children is an extreme form of child neglect and a rapidly increasing and serious social problem (Onyido & Akpan, 2018). Every child has the right to know his parents and be cared for by the parents (Arkadas-Thibert & Lansdown, 2022). As such when a child is abandoned this right is violated. Abandoned infants are at increased risk of failure to thrive, developmental delay, and decline in IQ scores, severe psychological disturbance, nosocomial infection and child abuse (Lvoff *et al*, 2000). It is difficult to determine the reasons as to why parents abandon their children, this is because in most of the cases of child abandonment the parents abandoned the children secretly and as such the parents are often unknown, meaning that no research can be conducted regarding their health, emotional state or personal circumstances that led to the abandonment (Browne, 2012). Despite this, several authors have proposed possible reasons for child abandonment which include family breakdown, which itself can be the result of inadequate housing and social services, desertion or death of one the parent, poverty and unemployment (Hammed *et al*, 2020). Other reasons for child abandonment are premature motherhood, It could also be due to fear of stigma by unwed mother that gave birth to an illegitimate child, death of both parents as a result of war, civil violence or natural disasters, son preference and negative cultural practices, poor mental health, family conflict, issues in terms of acquiring contraception, poor education, drug abuse and HIV are other reasons for child abandonment (Warthe *et al*, 2015). In Bulgaria, Bilson & Markova (2007) found that the majority of parents do not want to abandon their children, however, when confronted with poverty, illness or social exclusion, they often make this decision, believing that they are acting in the best interest of the children. Similarly, Dachev *et al* (2003) in Europe interviewed the parents of 75 children (aged 0–3 years old) that were abandoned at a local institution, the reasons they provided for abandoning their children included homelessness, lack of food, no heating during winter, and not enough nappies, additionally, 41% of the respondents already had four or more children in their family and felt that they could not afford any more. In Nigeria it is a criminal offence to abandon children, yet in some countries it is no longer illegal to abandon a child, on the condition that the child is left some where safe (safe haven) (Sattarova *et al*, 2023), special boxes (or baby hatches) are made available in some European countries where mothers can leave their babies anonymously and safe (Rousseau *et al*, 2021). This is to guarantee that newborns are abandoned in a secure setting and to prevent infant death (Sattarova *et al*, 2023). Safe haven regulations were introduced in the USA, according to these regulations, mothers in crisis can legally and safely give up their children without facing legal repercussions in a specific site where they will be safe and receive care until a permanent home can be found for the child (Rousseau *et al*, 2021). Hospitals are also considered safe havens in places where the safe haven law exist (Rousseau *et al*, 2021; Sattarova *et al*, 2023), mothers in difficulties can leave their babies in the hospital after delivery without facing any legal penalties (Sattarova *et al*, 2023). There is much debate surrounding safe haven, and there is no research regarding whether they actually save lives or encourage parents to abandon their children.

Despite the enormity of infant abandonment in our environment and in Nigeria, research regarding causes and possible preventive measures are very limited. This study aimed to determine the demographic characteristics of abandoned neonate admitted in the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU) of Usmanu Danfodiyo Teaching Hospital (UDUTH), Sokoto, the yearly trend and outcome of abandoned neonate admitted in the SCBU of UDUTH, Sokoto.

II. Materials And Methods

This was a hospital based retrospective study of abandoned babies that was carried out from 1st May, 2014 to 31st May, 2023 at the neonatal unit of UDUTH, Sokoto. The sex, approximated age at abandonment, gestational age, place of abandonment, date of admission, duration of admission, presence or absence of congenital anomalies, HIV infection, Hepatitis B virus infection or injuries, as well as outcome of the abandoned babies were obtained from the admission register and case files. For the purpose of this study, abandoned babies are defined as those babies that were abandoned and whose parents were not known. The rescued abandoned babies were brought for health check-up and treatment to the SCBU. After the discharge from hospital these abandoned babies were discharged to the orphanage home. Data was analysed using the IBM SPSS version 25 and 2016 Microsoft excel. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Ethics Committee of the Usmanu Danfodiyo University Teaching Hospital, Sokoto.

III. Results

Over the 9-year period of the study, 13 abandoned babies were admitted into the SCBU. Four were males and 9 were females, with a M: F of 0.3:1. Of the abandoned babies, 12(92.3%) were newborn and term (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the rescued abandoned babies.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Approximated Age		
Newborn (0-28 days)	12	92.3%
>28days-3months	1	7.7%
Gender of the child		
Male	4	30.8%
Female	9	69.2%
Gestational Age		
Term	12	92.3%
Preterm	1	7.7%

The yearly trend showed most of the babies were abandoned in the year 2016 and majority were females, and none in year 2017 (Figure 1).

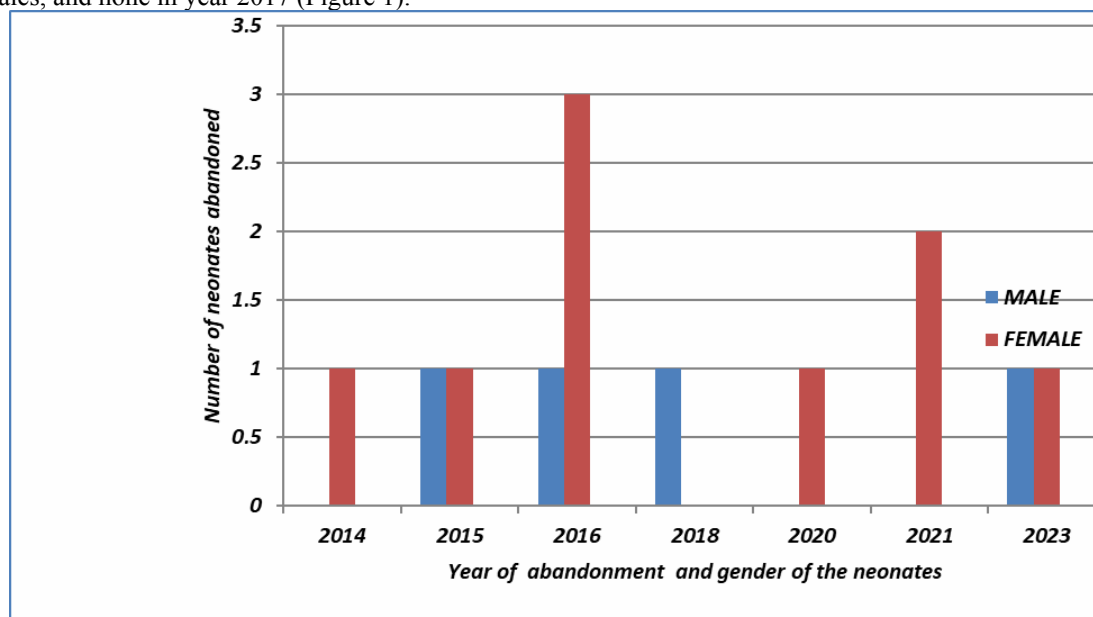


Figure 1: showing the yearly trend of neonatal abandonment

Majority 9(69.2%) of the babies that were abandoned were rescued at various places in the hospital premises, while 3(23.1%) were abandoned on the streets of Sokoto state. Some of the babies were dumped in the basket, carton, plastic bags, wrappers, while majority were clothed.

Table 2: Place of Neonatal abandonment

Place of abandonment	Frequency	percentage
Hospital premises	9	69.2%
Hospital labour room	1	7.7%
Streets of Sokoto	3	23.1%

Majority 7(53.8%) of the abandoned neonates at presentation to the Special Care Baby Unit had hypothermia, 5(38.5%) hypoglycemia, while 3(23.1%) had features of sepsis such as fever, respiratory distress (Table 3).

Table 3: Emergency conditions in the abandoned neonates at presentation to the Special Care Baby Unit

Emergency condition	Frequency	percentage
Hypothermia	7	53.8%
Hypoglycemia	5	38.5%
Features of sepsis	3	23.1%
Jaundice	2	15.4%

When the abandoned babies were examined, none of the babies had any gross congenital abnormality or injury and the blood investigations of the abandoned neonates showed none was HIV exposed, hepatitis B virus positive, but 3(23.0%) of the blood cultures of the abandoned neonates with features of septicaemia were positive. During the hospital stay of the neonates only 1 of the abandoned newborns were claimed by the relatives, 12(92.3) of the babies were discharged to the orphanage.

IV. Discussion

There is paucity of studies regarding newborn abandonment in Nigeria. Over the 9-year period of the present study from 2014 to 2023 a total of 13 babies abandoned were admitted into SCBU, an average 1 to 2 babies per year. More females than males were abandoned in this study, the reason may be due to son preference, this commemerate the finding of Warthe *et al*⁸ in India that reported that after active Pre-Conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Tehniques (PCPNDT) implementation due strict law enforcement about sex determination for son preference and sex selection abortion, the women were prohibited to do sex determination during pregnancy and the unwanted females were born and subsequently abandoned, although other reasons may be as result of the children been born out of wedlock and poverty. But contrary to the findings of this study, Sattarova etal (2023) reported more males were abandoned in their study. Majority of the babies were abandoned during neonatal period, Guha *et al* (2019) reported similar finding in their study 54.5% of the neonates have medical conditions requiring emergency treatment.

None of the neonates in this study was found to have any gross congenital anomaly, hence congenital deformity seems not to be a main cause of abandonment in this study, Warthe *et al* (2015) in India also reported similar findings, that only few (2.9%) of the abandoned babies had congenital abnormalities and also concluded that congenital abnormality was not the main reason for abandonment in their study. Only one of the abandon baby was born prematurely in the present, this is inconsistent with the findings of Sattarova et al ((2023) in Turkey that reported 27.6% of the abandoned neonates were preterms, this is not surprising as majority of the mothers in their study were teenage mothers and the neonates were delivered following unwanted pregnancies, which are all risk factors for preterm birth (Sattarova et al, 2023).

When abandoned babies were tested for HIV and hepatitis in our study, none was found to be HIV exposed or HBSAg positive, HIV positivity may also not be a cause for abandonment as seen in another study that was carried out in Turkey, but the same study reported that 7.8% of the neonates were HBSAg positive ((Sattarova et al, 2023).

In the present study the social and demographic characteristics of the mothers were not known because majority of the babies in our own study were abandoned secretly in the hospital premises where the study was done, while the other neonates were abandoned on the streets of Sokoto metropolis, except for one of the mothers whose identity is known, because she delivered in the hospital labour room where the study was conducted, the mother was a teenager, and the baby was a product of pregnancy out of wedlock, this is in contrast to the findings of a study in Turkey, where the save haven law exist, mothers in crisis intending to abandon their newborn can legally and safely leave their unwanted children even after delivery without facing legal repercussions (Sattarova et al, 2023), in the study of Sattarova et al (2023) where maternal data base of the mothers of the abandoned children exists, since the abandonment in their study was open, they reported that only few of the mothers were married, while majority were single mothers that had an unwanted pregnancy following rape and incest among others (Sattarova et al, 2023). No mortality was recorded in the present study among the neonates that were admitted into SCBU, however, two of the abandoned babies that were dumped in the hospital premises but not admitted into SCBU were found dead, the babies were abandoned during cold season, and the causes of death of these babies could be from hypothermia, hypoglycemia or asphyxia. This concur with the finding of Gheorghe et al (2011) that reported 11 neonatal corpses that were abandoned in Danish, in their report majority were females and known was found to have any congenital abnormality, most of the babies in their report were abandoned in plastic bags, only one of the babies was found clothed (Gheorghe et al, 2011), similarly, Warthe et al (2015) in India reported 2 out of the 69 abandoned babies died as a result of birth trauma which resulted from deliveries that were conducted secretly by a untrained birth attendants.

V. Conclusions

More female newborns than males were found abandoned in this study and none of the babies had any congenital abnormality or disease that could have predisposed the neonates to abandonment. Out of wedlock birth by teenage mothers following unwanted pregnancy is among the unknown causes of child abandonment in our study. Community awareness to prevent undesired pregnancies and the effect of newborn abandonment is advocated. Government at all levels should ensure the full implementation of the Child right act.

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