

Food Related Taboos Observed During Pregnancy in Malawi

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ABSTRACT Malawi's maternal mortality rate is among the worst (675 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). Pregnancy-related cases are key causes, hence the need to safeguard pregnancy. Traditional beliefs and ignorance are also believed to be some of the contributing factors. The study investigated food-related taboos observed during pregnancy. Qualitative research methods were used. These were: questionnaire interviews, focus group discussions, key informants and participant observations were used in data collection. Forty-six taboos were classified and documented into dietary, behavioural, sexual and cultural categories. Most of the participants had a low literacy level; therefore the taboos were meaningful to them as they were generation-generation knowledge. Although not all the taboos were harmful but there were some that were found to be detrimental to health, particularly dietary taboos, which prevent pregnant women from eating nutritious foods and endanger human life. The biggest challenge was that most of the taboos lacked scientific justifications. Nutritional education and awareness raising programmes should be instituted to discourage people from observing the detrimental taboos. Useful taboos should be encouraged. More research should be done to ascertain the meaning and the origin of the food taboos.