

# The 'Road to Health' card in a paediatric outpatient department

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## Summary

The use of the 'Road to Health' card was assessed in the Paediatric Outpatient Department of Tygerberg Hospital over three annual week-long surveys. Of 621 children seen, 344 (55%) were accompanied by a card which in 231 cases (67%) was still in its original polythene bag. Mass was recorded on a mean of 6 occasions, perinatal data were noted on 80% of cards, but the passing of milestones was noted on only 25% of cards. Episodes of illness were recorded on only 40% of cards.

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Paediatric outpatient clinics in South Africa function under considerable pressure of numbers. A 'Road to Health' card, with details of growth, immunisation, neurological development, and previous history available at a glance can expedite the evaluation of a child.<sup>1</sup> Despite more than a decade of availability little is known of the extent to which cards are used in hospital practice in the western Cape Province. In 1984, 1985 and 1986 5th-year medical students evaluated the use of the card in our outpatient department and their findings are presented. The 1984 survey was previously briefly reported.<sup>2</sup>

## Methods

Our 5th-year M.B. Ch.B. class is divided into 6 groups of approximately 25 students each. Each group undertakes a research project under the guidance of the consultant staff. This first introduction to research for many students is made possible by a syndicate system.<sup>3</sup> Subgroups undertake tasks such as collection of literature or statistical planning while the whole group assists in data collection. Findings are presented during an annual student research day.

In 1984 the survey was undertaken from 9 to 13 April, in 1985 from 21 to 25 January and in 1986 from 20 to 24 January. The parents or caretakers of all children < 5 years of age presenting sequentially to the outpatient department between 08h00 and 12h00 and between 18h00 and 21h00 were interviewed to establish whether a card accompanied the child and the extent of its use. In 1985 the survey at Tygerberg Hospital was limited to the first 130 children seen and a similar number were evaluated at Ravensmead and Crossroads local authority clinics.

## Results

Of 621 children seen at Tygerberg Hospital, 344 (55%) were accompanied by a card which in 231 cases (67%) was still in the original polythene bag. At Ravensmead 128 children and at Crossroads 135 children were all accompanied by cards. At Ravensmead

TABLE I. EXPLANATION GIVEN TO PARENT OR CARETAKER ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THE CARD (%)

	Tygerberg Hospital		Ravensmead	Crossroads
	1985	1986	1985	1985
None	46	50	52	10
Sister	45	40	43	74
Doctor	6	10	2	6
Other	3	—	2	10

102 (80%) and at Crossroads 104 (77%) of the cards were still in polythene bags. Mass was recorded on a mean of 6 occasions on the 607 cards evaluated. Perinatal data were recorded on 479 (80%) of the cards and immunisation was up to date for age in 566 cases (93%). BCG administration was noted on the cards of 97% of children attending Tygerberg Hospital and Ravensmead clinic and 82% attending Crossroads clinic.

In 1984 and 1986 only 72 (26%) of the 276 cards evaluated had the passing of one or more milestones noted. An episode of illness was noted on 71 (41%) of the 172 cards evaluated in 1984. In 1985 109 children accompanied by a card had a history of attending hospital, but this was noted on only 44 cards (40%).

In 1985 and 1986 229 (68%) of the parents or caretakers attending Tygerberg Hospital were requested to produce the card by the medical or nursing personnel. In these same years parents and caretakers at Tygerberg Hospital and the local authority clinics were asked whether the value and purpose of the card had been explained to them. The results, summarised in Table I, show a prominent role claimed for nursing staff at Crossroads.

## Discussion

That only 55% of children attending Tygerberg Hospital are accompanied by a card may be related to the fact that nobody had explained its purpose to approximately half the parents or caretakers, and that in 32% of cases the card was not requested. It is disappointing that insufficient use is made of the opportunity to establish a permanent record of episodes of illness and of neurological development. At local authority level the card appears to function well, and immunisation and gain in mass are satisfactorily recorded.

We have now instituted an educational programme for mothers and expectant mothers in our maternity wards and paediatric outpatient department with emphasis on a request for the 'Road to Health' card and its evaluation as an integral part of the paediatric interview and history-taking for doctors and nurses.

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## REFERENCES

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