Reducing Mortality Rates in Children Younger than Age 5 Years Around the World: Charles Dickens’ Perspective

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After reading the article “Drooping Buds,” which was written in 1852, I was disappointed to learn about the high incidence of infant and childhood mortality rates in London during that time.

Of this great city of London—which, until a few weeks ago, contained no hospital wherein to treat and study the diseases of children—more than a third of the whole population perishes in infancy and childhood. Twenty four in a hundred die, during the first two years of life; and during the next eight years, eleven die out of the remaining seventy-six.¹

At the time, Dickens and his colleagues were advocating for the opening of a children’s hospital in London—Hospital for Sick Children (Great Ormond Street)—as hospitals for sick children were already in Paris, Berlin, Turin, Munich, Moscow and other countries around the world.¹ A follow-up article, “From the Cradle to the Grave,” stated: “In the first five of its ten years of existence, it received into its beds more than eleven hundred children seriously and dangerously ill, and gave the best help of medicine to thirty thousand sick children who were nursed at home. In the second half of its life almost two thousand little children have been sedulously tended in the little beds of the hospital, and almost fifty thousand have received as outpatients gratuitous advice and medicine.”²

Our mission as pediatric providers is to provide the best acute, chronic, and preventive care for our pediatric patients and their families, just as Dickens and Morley stated in 1852 and 1862, respectively. The estimates for mortality rates for children younger than age 5 years are significantly lower in the United Kingdom in comparison to the rates discussed by Dickens and Morley: 4.9 deaths per 1,000 in 2013.³ However, the rates in the UK are higher compared to other countries in Europe.³ Globally, according to Wang et al.,⁴ mortality rates between 1980 and 2015 have shown steady decreases over time; this should reassure us that things are progressing as Dickens would have wanted.

As pediatric clinicians, may we continue to further influence this decrease and to improve the quality of life for children and their families worldwide.

REFERENCES

2. Morley H. From the cradle to the grave. All the Year Round. 1862;VI:455.