

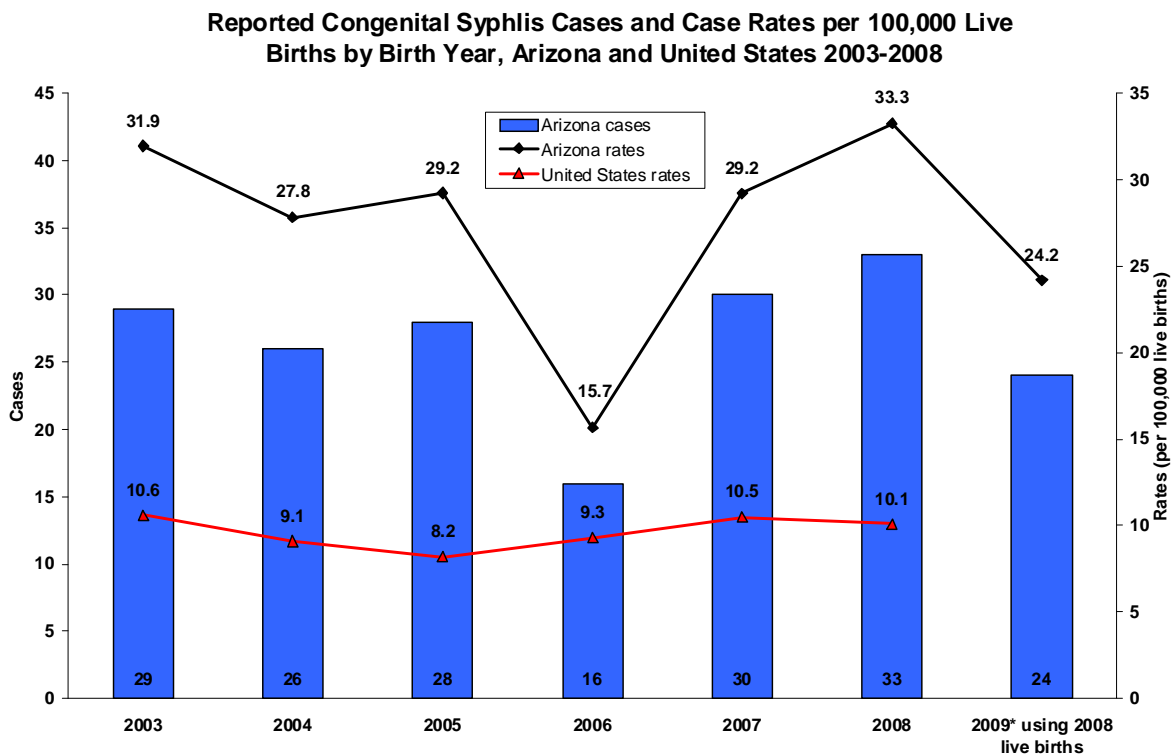


PIMA COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
 Clinical & Outreach Services • HIV/STD PROGRAM
 332 S. Freeway • Tucson, Arizona 85745
 (520) 791-7676 • Fax (520) 628-8951

February 17, 2010

Dear Obstetrical Provider:

I am writing to highlight an ongoing and increasing problem of great public health significance, and that is, our rate of congenital syphilis cases. Arizona was #1 for rates of congenital syphilis in the nation from 2003-2005, and we remain one of the most highly impacted states in the nation. During the late 1990's to ~2001, there were hardly any congenital syphilis cases in Pima County, but since we started our syphilis outbreak in ~2001, numbers of congenital syphilis cases have been rising.

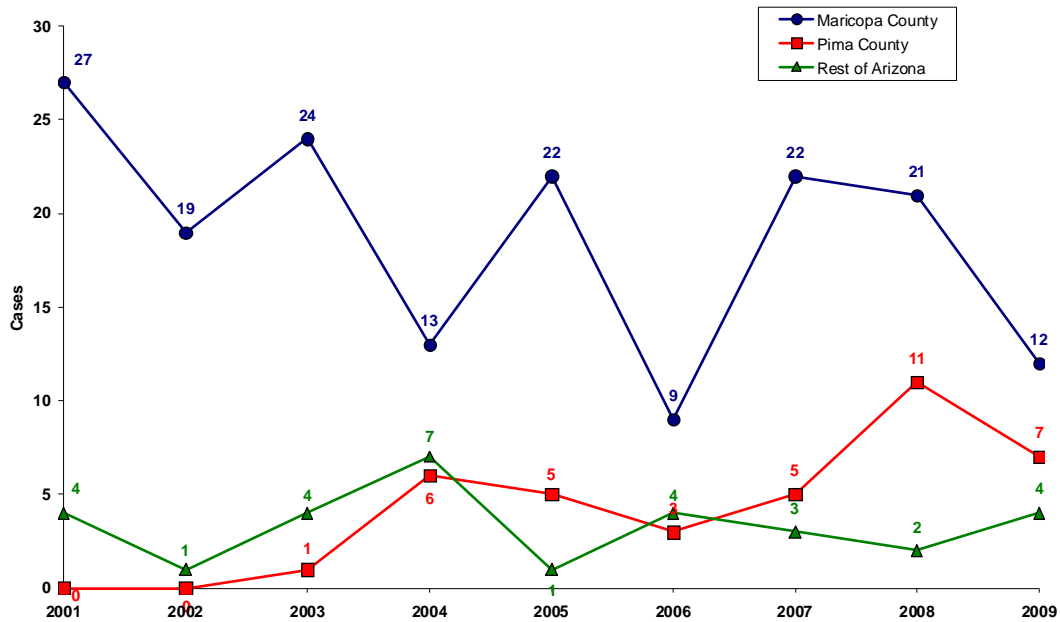


*2009 Cases are preliminary and reported as of 2/2/2010

In an effort to reverse the elevated rates of congenital syphilis cases in Pima County, the Pima County Health Department is offering assistance to OB-GYN providers to identify and treat cases of syphilis in women.

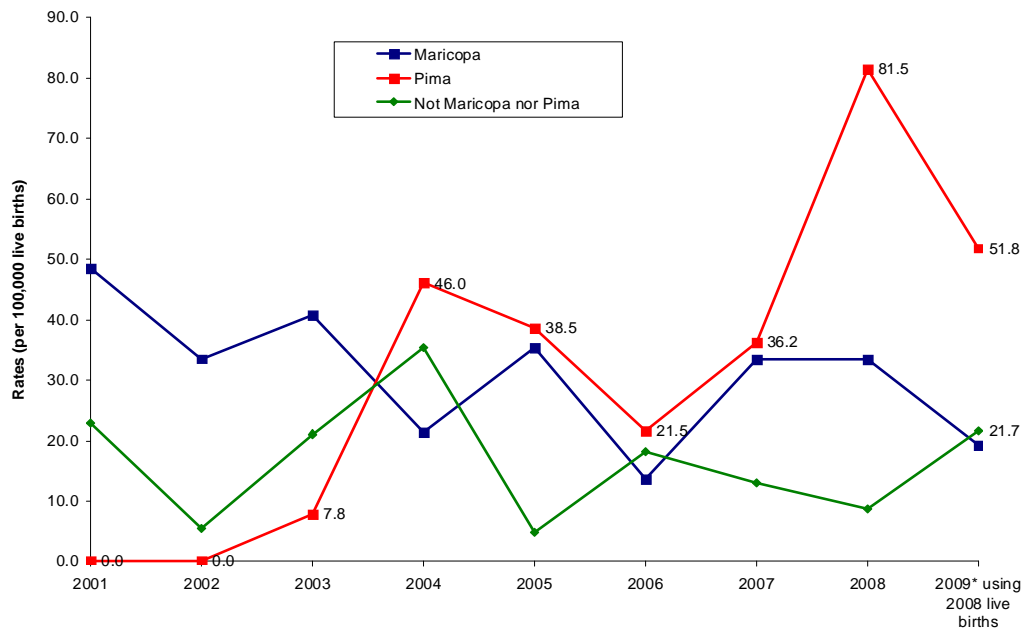
Most of Arizona's cases have occurred in Maricopa and in Pima Counties. Although Maricopa County has had a greater number of cases than Pima County, our rates have been higher due to our smaller population.

Reported Congenital Syphilis (by Birth Year) Cases by County Arizona 2003-2008



*2009 Cases are preliminary and reported as of 2/2/2010

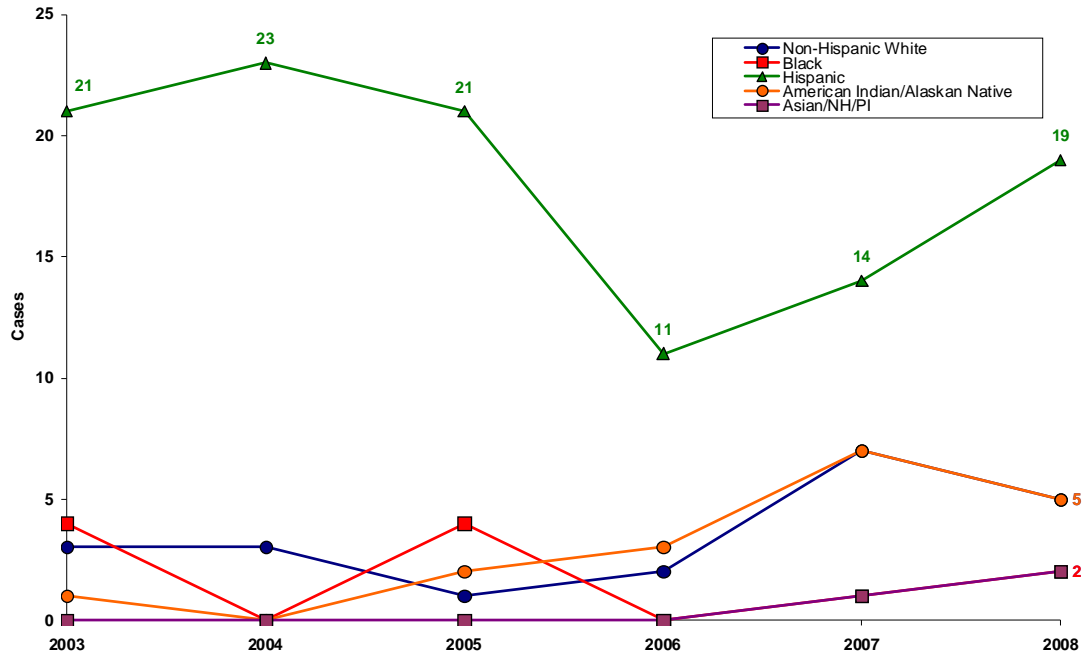
Arizona Rates per 100,000 Live Births of Reported Congenital Syphilis by County, 2001-2009*



*2009 Cases are preliminary and reported as of 2/2/2010

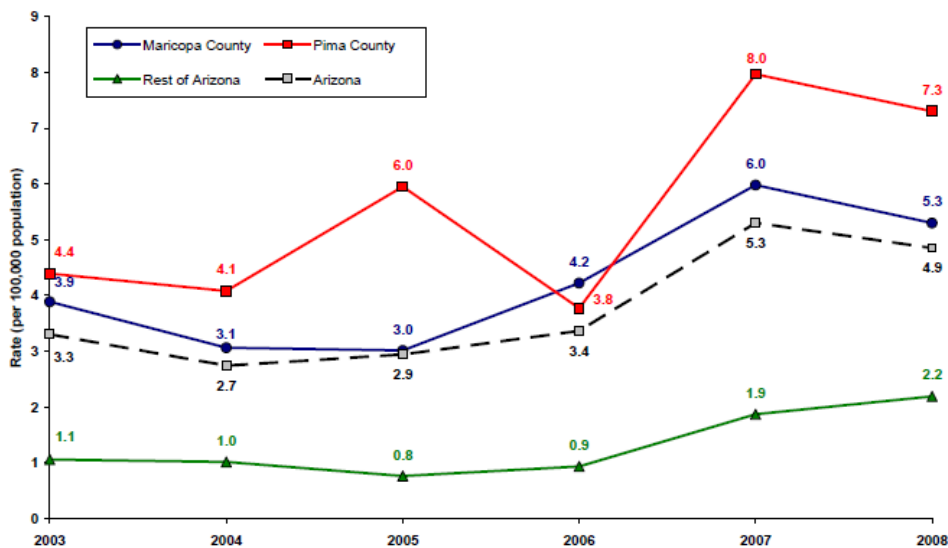
As with many infectious diseases, there are disparities in the population most impacted by congenital syphilis in our state, and Hispanic women in particular have been significantly disproportionately impacted in Arizona.

**Reported Congenital Syphilis (by Birth Year) Cases by Race/Ethnicity
Arizona 2003-2008**



Many of the women who have been infected with syphilis during pregnancy in Pima County are drug involved, especially with cocaine. Many have had little or late prenatal care, which creates some significant challenges in identifying syphilis-infected women and getting them treated prior to delivery. While there are some risk factors the women may have that increase their likelihood of having syphilis, the outbreak we are in leaves open the very real possibility that women who appear low risk might be infected. The incredibly high rates of primary and secondary syphilis in Pima County means there is significant ongoing transmission in our community.

Figure 2. Reported Primary and Secondary Syphilis Case Rates per 100,000 Population by County of Residence, Arizona 2003-2008



Per CDC guidelines, areas with a high incidence of infectious early syphilis and especially with a high incidence of congenital syphilis, should increase antenatal screening. In Pima County, we urge “triple testing” during pregnancy. We strongly recommend testing all pregnant women at the first prenatal visit, during the third trimester, and at delivery. I know that many of our area hospitals are not routinely testing all women at delivery and hope to reach out to them with some of this information in the near future. In the meantime, I strongly recommend you request and review a syphilis serology prior to discharging a woman who has delivered.

Additionally, I urge you to assure that all congenital syphilis-suspected cases are reported. A recent retrospective analysis matching women with reported syphilis with mothers in the birth registry, uncovered three additional congenital syphilis cases in 2007 (two of whom were treated) and four additional congenital syphilis cases in 2008 (three of whom were treated and one of which was a stillbirth to a woman with no time for a documented response to her treatment for syphilis). Given that low numbers of congenital syphilis cases are highly significant (our number should be 0!), this lack of reporting led to a delay in recognizing the real severity of the problem and the fact that Pima County has at least as large if not larger problem than Maricopa County. This led to a delay in adequately alerting the community to this problem.

Finally, I would like to make you aware of some of the services available to you through the Pima County Health Department. We certainly carry long acting bicillin, and can provide treatment to your patients if you do not have it on hand. Additionally, if you have a pregnant woman in your office that you have identified to have syphilis, and you are concerned she is high risk for not coming to the Health Department, or not following through with her prenatal care, we are willing to deliver the penicillin to your office. We urge you to report all cases – we actively investigate syphilis cases to ensure follow-up through documentation of cure as well as to assure partners are found and treated. Through the state syphilis database, we can also search for all previous positive serologies and reported treatment. This can be of GREAT assistance in determining the stage of syphilis and thus the amount of treatment needed, as well as documenting response to treatment prior to the time of delivery (which is critical in making decisions about the infant’s status and need for treatment). We are most willing to share this information with treating clinicians. Please call our STD Program at 624-8271 for any questions, and feel free to refer your patients to us at the Theresa Lee Clinic, 332 S. Freeway.

Sincerely,



Michelle McDonald, MD
Chief Medical Officer



Richard May, RN
STD Program Nurse Manager