

In this issue of BJOG, Goldenberg and McClure underscore some of the problems with assigning causes of death to stillbirths and neonatal deaths in low resource settings (BJOG XX). They also point the way forward. Classification or assigning causes of death is a key step towards prevention of stillbirth and neonatal death. However, ascertaining causes of death is extremely challenging in poor countries owing to limited resources and personnel.

It is however equally, if not more, important to investigate perinatal deaths in low resource settings. The RESPECT group triangulated two systematic reviews in high and low/middle-income settings to inform a Delphi consensus exercise (Shakespeare, personal communication). It was agreed that a core principle of respectful care is to investigate all perinatal deaths within available resources as it might reduce stigma.

Autopsy and placental evaluation are critical parts of an evaluation for perinatal death. The use of minimally invasive tissue sampling (MITS) has the potential to be transformative. As outlined in the commentary, MITS is more accepted by families than autopsy. Also, it is less expensive, time intensive and can provide critical information regarding causes of perinatal death. In addition to histology, molecular genetic technology can be used to assess infections, an extremely common cause of both stillbirth and neonatal death in low resource settings. Of course, MITS still requires considerable resources and may not be widely available. Nonetheless, global philanthropic efforts can support increased availability given the potential value.

Another attractive recommendation is to create algorithms for determining causes of death. There is no question that algorithms cannot match at present the nuance of multidisciplinary panels for classifying deaths in complex cases with conflicting data. On the other hand, such panels are incredibly resource intensive and are simply not feasible in many high resource, let alone low resource settings. Moreover, artificial intelligence is evolving at a pace and is likely to make algorithms both more sophisticated and efficient. It is far better to have a good, albeit imperfect result, than to have no result at all due to practical issues of feasibility. As often is the case, perfect can be the enemy of the good.