

Doctors To Study Iraq Birth Defects

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By Lisa Holland Foreign Affairs correspondent Updated:12:40, Tuesday June 10, 2008

Sky News recently reported on families in the Iraqi city of Fallujah who are calling for an independent investigation into their concerns about a rise in the number of newborn babies suffering from deformities.

Deformed children common in Fallujah They raised concerns about the weapons used by American forces in 2004 during the war in Iraq – and are now questioning whether there could be any links with the deformities.

As a result of seeing our exclusive report, one of the world's leading authorities on foetal medicine, Professor Kypros Nicolaides, has decided to offer three scholarships to obstetricians in Fallujah.

This would involve the doctors coming to study at the Fetal Medicine Foundation in London, and on their return being supported to work in hospitals in Fallujah.

The hope is to improve the care of pregnant women in the city, and with better training and scanning equipment, ultimately doctors would be able to set up a birth registry which may throw some light on the concerns of those who believe Fallujah is suffering an abnormal rate of birth deformities.

In April and November, 2004, Fallujah saw some of the heaviest bombardments of the war in Iraq.

Hikmat Tawfeeq, deputy chairman of the Fallujah-based human rights group Alakhiyar said: "We have around 200 cases of deformities recorded by our society. Most of these birth deformities started appearing after the war in Iraq."

The evidence is anecdotal – there are no records from Saddam Hussein era to compare their stories with – but they believe their findings are disturbing.

Campaigners say officials are reluctant to speak out publicly but at Fallujah's Children's Hospital one doctor told us in the past month she's seen one or two cases of birth deformities every day.

US Marines in Fallujah in 2004 An ophthalmologist said he deals with four or five case of newborn babies every week suffering from some form of eye deformity – and that's risen in the last two years.

At one of the cemeteries in Fallujah, undertaker Mahmoud Hummadi said he usually buries four to five newborns every day and most of them are deformed.

Speaking on Sky News, Professor Nicolaides said: "I was very disturbed by the report.

"It's impossible in the absence of specific records to define the extent of the problem and it's for this reason I feel it's important to try and help the families that are having babies with problems to identify them before they are born and to document the exact size of the problem.

"I feel it's important to have properly trained doctors that can carry out pre-natal diagnosis, ultra-sound scans in pregnancy so that all of the women are examined to identify if their babies are carrying any major deformities.

"Secondly, the same people could be trained in documenting all of the cases with deformities that already exist."

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