



Department
of Health &
Social Care

From Jo Churchill MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Primary Care and Health Promotion

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Mr Zak Golombeck
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11 May 2021

Dear Mr Golombeck,

Thank you for your letter of 27 January 2021 to Matt Hancock about the death of Michael Chahwanda. I am replying as the Minister with responsibility for child health and I am grateful for the additional time in which to do so.

Firstly, I would like to say how very sorry I was to read the circumstances of baby Michael's death. I can appreciate how deeply distressing Michael's death must be for his mother and family and it is important we do all we can to learn the lessons from Michael's death to prevent future deaths.

I have noted carefully your concern about the provision of important information on vitamin D supplementation in the postnatal period.

I wish to assure you that we recognise the need to equip parents with appropriate health advice, particularly during the first months and years of their child's life. We also recognise the need to support professionals working with parents to give individual, tailored support for the child and their parents or carers. That way, we can prevent problems from arising in the first place, rather than dealing with the consequences.

It is distressing that some infants suffer serious harm or even death as a result of vitamin D deficiency, and every case is a tragedy. We are determined to do everything we can to prevent these deaths.

Existing Government advice on vitamin D supplementation is based on recommendations from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and is clear on the requirements for different population groups, such as breastfed infants.

I am aware that the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (the RCPCH) has confirmed that advice on vitamin supplementation is provided in the Personal Child Health Record (also known as the 'red book'¹), which, as you know, is a national standard health

¹ [Personal Child Health Record \(PCHR\) | RCPCH](#)

and development record given to parents and carers at a child's birth. The information and advice contained in the red book is constantly under review, and the most recent version (version 4.6) was updated in August 2020. Advice contained in the red book stipulates that all pregnant women, babies and young children from birth to five years should have a daily supplement containing vitamin D, and it states that breastfed babies need vitamin drops from birth alongside breast milk.

I am informed that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has advised you in its response that it will work with NHS Digital and NHSx as the red book is digitised to ensure content is aligned with the relevant NICE guidelines and recommendations on vitamin D supplementation. I am aware that NICE has also explained to you the advice contained within its current guideline on Vitamin D supplement use in specific population groups².

Advice on vitamin supplementation is also provided through a variety of sources such as the NHS.UK website and the Start4Life social marketing campaign, which provides advice during pregnancy, birth and parenthood. This includes specific, directive, advice on vitamin D supplementation during pregnancy, breast-feeding and for babies and young children.

However, we appreciate that more can always be done, and we will review all NHS.UK and Start4Life references to vitamin D to ensure that the requirements for pregnant and breast-feeding women and their infants, particularly those with dark skin, are absolutely clear. I will discuss with my fellow Minister, Nadine Dorries, the importance of it being talked about between the midwife and mother.

In relation to the provision of vitamin D supplements to specific population groups at increased risk from vitamin D deficiency, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition is responsible for advising the Government on the vitamin D needs of the population.

In line with advice from the Scientific Advisory Group, the Department has put in place measures to provide vitamin D supplements to women and babies who are at increased risk. Through universal health and wellbeing reviews offered to new parents, health visitors provide targeted advice to parents on vitamin drops and where to get them. Pregnant women, new mothers and children under the age of four who are on low incomes and in receipt of defined social security benefits are entitled to free vitamin D supplements through the Healthy Start scheme. Healthy Start Vitamins for women and children contain a daily dose of 10 microgrammes of vitamin D. Under current advice from the Scientific Advisory Group, the Department does not plan to change current policy on the guidance and provision of vitamin D.

Finally, you may wish to note that we have just received a report from the Early Years Health Adviser, Andrea Leadsom MP, who has been leading a major review into improving health outcomes in babies and young children³. The review will consider the barriers that impact on early-years development, including social and emotional factors and early

² [Overview | Vitamin D: supplement use in specific population groups | Guidance | NICE](#)

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-focus-on-babies-and-childrens-health-as-review-launches>

childhood experiences, and seek to show how to reduce impacts on vulnerability and adverse childhood experiences in this stage of life.

I hope this response is helpful, and you feel reassured we are working on preventing baby deaths from Vitamin D deficiency. Thank you for bringing these concerns to my attention.



JO CHURCHILL