

Illiteracy at 7	Diskors ta' l-Istudenti	Strengths and Weaknesses of Small Islands	Trade Schools in Gozo	Theses by Gozitan Students
Profile: Joe Xuereb, sculptor	Aspects of Health of the Gozitan people	Tourists in Gozo	Il-Gwardjani Lokali	Book Profile: The Maltese Migrant Experience
Book Profile: The Placenames of the coast of Gozo	Mini-Medicine in Gozo	Poems	Typing Maltese Characters	Front Cover

The process of development is a wonderful and weird one, where most complicated procedures take place in a most complex manner. A mass of jelly is organised into structures that defy the most advanced technology yet invented by man. All this happens to the fetus in the short space of 9 months.

No wonder that sometimes things can go wrong. A mistake can develop in the master-plan encoded within the DNA of every cell within the body. These so called 'mutations' can vary from insignificant to lethal, depending on the type and degree of damage produced, a purely stochastic effect.

Sometimes, these changes are the result of an environmental onslaught, particularly virus infections or toxic chemicals. These can be harmful at any stage during development, but are particularly effective during the crucial time when the basic organ structures within the body are being laid down, namely around the second and third month of pregnancy. It is

at this time that viruses, such as the German measles virus for instance, can be so dangerous.

An analysis of the Congenital Anomalies Register shows the information summarised in the following table of "major" congenital anomalies. Up to 3 per cent of all births in Malta and Gozo may be affected by such a congenital anomaly. There were in fact 16 deaths over-all during this one-year period - equivalent to the total number of road-deaths during the same period of time, for instance.

Table: Congenital Anomalies during 1998 in Malta and Gozo.

[Source: Malta Congenital Anomalies Register, Department of Health Information.]

	Jan - June 1998		July - Dec 1998		Total		
	Births	Anomalies	Births	Anomalies	Births	Anomalies	%
Malta							
Male	1027	25	1160	41	2187	66	3.02
Female	987	32	1070	27	2057	59	2.87
Total	2014	57	2230	68	4244	125	2.95
Gozo							
Male	108	3	74	2	182	5	2.75
Female	102	2	95	2	197	4	2.03
Total	110	5	169	4	379	9	2.37

The following points are worth considering:

1. There is a preponderance in the percentages of males with congenital anomalies compared to females (in the ratio of 1.45:1 for the Malta population and 1.36:1 for the Gozo population. The number of births for Gozo is too small to make the difference between the two islands significant)
2. Down Syndrome accounts for a considerable number of births with anomalies. This disorder results from a chromosomal abnormality (triple chromosome 21). The prevalence is very much dependent on the age of the mother, varying from around 3.5 per 10,000 births when the mother is around 30 years of age to 140 per 10,000 births when she reaches the age of 40 (see figure).
3. The most frequent anomalies affect the heart and cardiovascular system, with the next most common being musculo-skeletal

abnormalities. These together account for 50 per cent of all anomalies.

4. Prevention is not very practicable in our community. Resistance against rubella (German measles) is best achieved through exposure to the virus in childhood. Vaccination against rubella is now available. Avoidance as far as possible other viral infections is merely counsel of perfection. Detection of chromosomal anomalies in the fetus is possible but not feasible in our community.

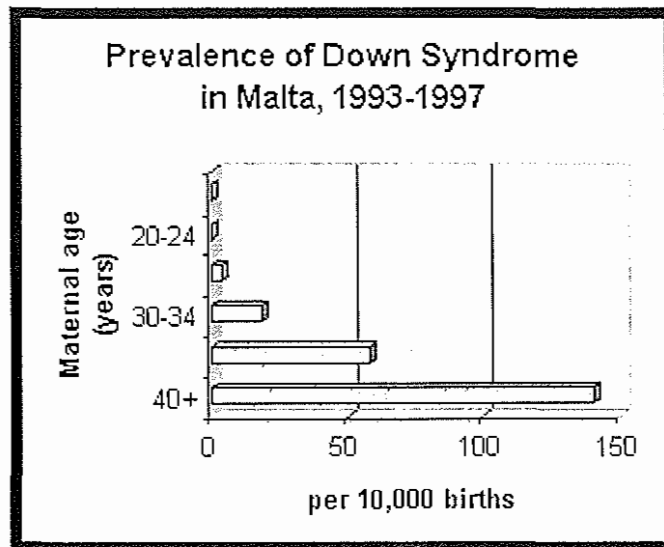


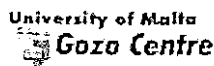
Figure: Prevalence of Down Syndrome in Malta, 1993-1997, to show increasing chance of having an affected baby as the mother gets older. [Source: Malta Congenital Anomalies Register, Department of Health Information, Half yearly Report, July-December, 1998]

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