

A Note on Possible Bias in Obit Data on Tetanus

When counting neonatal tetanus deaths, or any death of infants during the nineteenth century, a historian faces potential problems with the data. In most parts of the world during the nineteenth century, child birthing was excluded from the domain and “expertise” of men and doctors, and thus the state. Midwifery was a profession steeped in centuries of tradition and unregulated by most governments. Furthermore, childbirth carried all kinds of complications for the mother and infant, and it was common for women to die during delivery, to miscarry or deliver stillborn babies, or for newborns to die during or soon after birth. Mothers and families likely felt less obligated to report the fairly common death of a fetus or newborn than the death of an older child or adult that a family and community knew. On the other hand, Brazil was a deeply Catholic country and one in which most people were concerned about the fate of their children’s souls. Babies not baptized were said to be excluded from heaven, although there was not unanimity among Catholic theologians on this issue. To avoid the unpleasant fate of newborn souls, the Catholic Church allowed laymen to hastily administer the sacraments at the side of the birthing bed or table but mandated that all baptisms be registered at the local parish office¹ (CE, 1913, 267-69). Within these records, a historian always finds a desolately large number of “*recemnacidos*” (newborns with only minutes or hours of life) and infants who lived but a day or two. In the registers of the Parish of Nossa Senhora de Madre de Deus in Porto Alegre, for example, many more infants were baptized “right before” death or “on the same day” of their birth and death² (LONSMD, 1835, 1841, 1843). I believe it likely that many of these were stillborns or infants who died during delivery, yet had been treated as if alive and baptized so as to relieve their family of worry or guilt. Because concern over baptism was high and death registers were carefully kept by the church in the early to mid-part of the century and by town cemeteries, hospitals and governments during the mid- to late part of the century, I believe the data are reliable. Nonetheless, it could be possible that there were more infant deaths, including those from neonatal tetanus, which went unreported. If this is true, rates of tetanus in Brazil, already unusually high by global standards, would have been higher.

¹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia; An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church.* New York: Gilmary Society, 1913.

² Livro de obitos de Freguezia de Nossa Senhora Madre de Deus [Porto Alegre, 1835, 1841, 1843]. Arquivo Histórico da Cúria Metropolitana de Porto Alegre.