This book evaluates the effectiveness of prenatal care interventions and provides a framework for prenatal care that looks beyond the limited perspective of immediate neonatal outcomes. Ultimately, this book seeks to improve the content and the implementation of prenatal care by shifting the focus away from short-term technocentric medical advances to concentrate on the broader public health issues. A unique aspect of this book is its focus on the effectiveness of prenatal care interventions on longer-term benefits for women’s and children’s health. Traditional medical interventions, as well as social support and behavioral interventions during prenatal care, are reviewed. Effectiveness is considered within the context of its implications for public policy and service delivery.

This book is an important resource for maternal and child health professionals, policy makers and health care managers because it provides a thorough discussion of the practice and potential of prenatal care services for improving the long-term health of women and children.
Prenatal care

Effectiveness and Implementation

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Foreword

Lisa A. Simpson, MB, BCH, MPH and Carolyn M. Clancy, MD

The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) holds the main responsibility at the federal level for examining the relationship between how health care is organized, financed, and delivered and the care outcomes and health of those it is intended to serve. Since its inception, AHCPR has struggled to balance the need for rigorous research that addresses the question of what works with the impatience of all stakeholders in the health care system for solutions rather than ever more refined questions. Increased demands by public policy makers, health systems leaders, and even patients for better evidence to inform decisions at all levels of health care delivery is exciting – but also creates an unprecedented opportunity and challenge to the research community, and underscores the lacunae in the knowledge base supporting many areas of health care delivery. It was in recognition of this opportunity that AHCPR supported the conference that formed the basis for this book on the practice and the potential of prenatal care.

Research on effectiveness and cost-effectiveness can and does affect health policy. In 1985, the Institute of Medicine published Preventing Low Birthweight, a work often cited as the prime example of the impact research can have. The finding that every dollar spent on providing more adequate prenatal care for low-income, poorly educated women could reduce medical expenditures by $3.38 in the first year of the baby’s life was a potent stimulus for subsequent policies that expanded Medicaid benefits for pregnant women and children. Providing early and adequate prenatal care has subsequently become a sentinel indicator for the success of public health and private care systems, whether at the local, state, or national level. The Healthy People initiatives and the HEDIS reporting requirements are two noteworthy examples. It is no wonder, then, that recent challenges to the evidence base underlying the premise – and the promise – of prenatal care have been presented cautiously. Many fear that asking hard questions, and finding too few hard answers, may reverse this Nation’s incremental progress toward improving the health of women and children.

However, as the leaders of this conference recognized, failure to address the
issues discussed here may obscure opportunities to understand which interventions are most effective in reducing preterm delivery as well as infant morbidity and mortality – and for which populations. In addition, a narrow focus on medical services included within standard definitions of prenatal care limits opportunities to consider how prenatal care fits within and complements women's health needs across the lifespan. Women’s health care has historically been fragmented in the U.S., with reproductive needs juxtaposed with “all other” health care services. This book represents an important effort to challenge researchers and all others who have a stake in the health of families to reconsider both the questions and the possible solutions, and additionally, to motivate the research community to focus on areas where our knowledge base remains deficient.

We salute the conference organizers and participants for accepting these challenges. We are hopeful that readers of this book will assist AHCPR in its efforts to identify opportunities for translating research into practice and policy, and then to report on the impact of the changes that have been brought about. As John Eisenberg has said, it is not enough just to publish. It is our highest hope and expectation that this book represents a first of many steps to reconceptualize and redesign prenatal care within a broader context of women’s health needs.
Acknowledgments

In June 1997, the Harvard Center for Children’s Health and the Department of Maternal and Child Health at the Harvard School of Public Health hosted a conference examining prenatal care and its impact on the health of women and children. The conference, which was the genesis of this book, brought together researchers and practitioners in pediatrics and women’s health to analyze the evidence linking prenatal interventions to improved health outcomes for women and children. For their contributions to the conference and ultimately to this book, we owe our sincere thanks to many individuals and organizations.

First and foremost, we would like to thank the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) for their financial support of the conference. We are especially grateful to Heddy Hubbard and Denise Dougherty at AHCPR for their guidance and support. Additional financial support from the Massachusetts Chapter of the March of Dimes and Ross Laboratories made it possible for several health professionals from community-based organizations to attend the conference.

In planning the conference, we convened an Advisory Committee to help us refine the scope and content of the program. We are indebted to the members of this committee, Judyann Bigby, Jennifer Haas, Jody Heymann, Lorraine Klerman, Alan Leviton, Ellice Lieberman, and James Perrin, for their valuable insights and advice. We also thank Julie Henry who, as Chair of the Advisory Council for the Harvard Center for Children’s Health, provided behind-the-scenes encouragement and practical advice throughout the process.

We wish to express our gratitude to the invited authors and their co-authors, who generously gave of their time and effort. These individuals are leaders in their fields, and we feel privileged to include their writing in this volume. Several other individuals served as discussants and invited speakers at the conference: Florence Haseltine, Claudia Holzman, Woodie Kessel, Mark Klebanoff, Deborah Klein Walker, Milton Kotchuch, Evelyn Murphy, and Susan Pauker. Their stimulating presentations, comments and insights are also reflected in this book. For her role in preparing the reference sections of the manuscript, we also owe our thanks to Patricia Schmieg.
Finally, we wish to thank two individuals who were instrumental to the success of this project. Deborah DuFault Denhart served as project manager for the conference and the preparation of this book. In addition to managing countless details, she helped keep the book true to its vision. We are also deeply indebted to Anne Brown Rodgers for her careful, thoughtful, and professional editing of this manuscript. Her talents and good humor kept this book on track through its many revisions, and her contributions greatly influenced the quality of the final product. We have been very fortunate to work with such talented individuals.