Written evidence from the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH)

Response from Dr Olwen Williams, President of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH)

In response to a question from Committee member Luciana Berger MP, I suggested that there had been one instance of a neonatal death caused by syphilis infection in the UK within the past year. This was based on a highly credible verbal account provided to me in good faith by a BASHH colleague in advance of the Committee inquiry session. Having taken steps to since verify this comment, it turns out that this was a misreported case and that the baby in question - who did have neonatal syphilis infection and required management in intensive care - in fact survived.

Ongoing discussions however between a number of leading sexual health doctors across the country on this issue have revealed that there have in fact been two locally confirmed cases of in-utero deaths as a result of syphilis infection, which is an issue of comparative concern. Based on these discussions, cases of in-utero deaths across the UK as a result of syphilis infection in the past year appear to be in the single digits in terms of frequency, and the discussion has also demonstrated that insufficient coding mechanisms are in place to facilitate accurate reporting of these cases to Public Health England, which has meant that the situation has been under-appreciated in recent years. BASHH remain extremely concerned about the increasing frequency of syphilis in pregnant women and their children and we hope that this represents a priority area for consideration by policymakers.

I hope this is a helpful response, and I would be very happy to provide any further information on the above that the Committee might find useful.

Dr Olwen Williams,
President of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV