The Association of British Neurologists has been concerned for many years about women taking the epilepsy treatment sodium valproate in pregnancy. We strongly support the proposed changes in labeling and the provision of additional information for women taking this treatment. Valproate can damage the unborn baby, and can increase the risk of low intelligence and autism in children whose mothers took this medication in pregnancy.

However, for women taking valproate and thinking of a pregnancy, changing to another treatment is not straightforward, because valproate is such a good treatment for some kinds of epilepsy. If a young woman is already taking valproate and would like to become pregnant, it is important she is made aware of and understands the other risks.

Firstly, no one can be certain that a different treatment will control her seizures as well as valproate. Having just one seizure might lead to loss of a driving licence, loss of confidence, and even loss of a job;
Secondly, if the different treatment does not work as well and she starts to have major convulsive seizures, there are risks, even a risk of her dying during a seizure;
Thirdly, women in the UK who change their epilepsy medication and have a driving licence are supposed to stop driving until six months after the change is complete, even if they have no seizures in that time.

Thus, we are very keen that any woman who is taking valproate must know all about the risks of becoming pregnant whilst taking this treatment. However, we also know changing to another treatment can have its own problems, and anyone making this change will need a lot of information and support.