

Executive Summary

WHO Making Pregnancy Safer initiative: A health sector strategy for reducing maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality

Motherhood is a positive and fulfilling experience for most women, however for more than 20 million, pregnancy and childbirth are associated with suffering, ill-health or death. Every year, approximately eight million women endure pregnancy-related complication(s) and over half a million of them die as a result. In addition, nearly four million newborns die within the first week of life and another three million are born dead. The threat of maternal morbidity and mortality is greatest for poor women in developing countries. One woman in 11 may die of pregnancy-related complications in developing countries, compared to one in 5,000 in developed countries. These two figures represent one of the starkest discrepancies in global health.

Making these statistics even harder to bear is the fact that evidence has shown that the five main causes of direct obstetric deaths – which account for nearly 80% of maternal deaths worldwide – can be prevented through actions that are effective and affordable in developing countries. Similarly for the newborn, if key interventions are applied then perinatal deaths could be reduced by at least 50% worldwide.

Disturbed by the large burden of unnecessary deaths and suffering, international partners mobilized behind the Safe Motherhood Initiative and committed to achieving the following targets:

- Reduction of maternal mortality ratios by 75% from 1990 levels by 2015;
- Reduction of infant mortality to below 35 per 1000 live births by the year 2015;
- Provision of access for all who need reproductive health services by 2015;
- Skilled attendants present at 80% of births, globally, by the year 2005. Where maternal mortality is very high, 40% of births should be assisted by the year 2005; by 2010, this figure should be 50% and by 2015, at least 60%.

Regrettably, the Safe Motherhood Initiative did not completely fulfil expectations; efforts were often spread too thin and technical, political and management problems impeded progress. Compounding these problems, epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis began to emerge or re-emerge, further complicating the pregnancies of the world's underprivileged. At the local level, health systems' constraints such as lack of investment in human resources and in infrastructure – especially in rural areas – as well as shortages of essential drugs, equipment and supplies have also hampered the strategies in place to reduce maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality. Recent estimates indicate that at the current rate of progress the global targets listed above will not be achieved.

Following the lessons learned from the Safe Motherhood Initiative a joint WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF/World Bank statement on Reduction of Maternal Mortality in 1999 formed the basis for consensus on:

- prevention and management of unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion;
- the importance of skilled care in pregnancy and childbirth; and
- the need for access to referral care when complications arise.

The Making Pregnancy Safer initiative aims to refocus WHO's strategies and efforts in Safe Motherhood and maintain the issue firmly on the international development

agenda. Broadly, the goals of the Safe Motherhood Initiative and Making Pregnancy Safer are the same—protecting and promoting reproductive and human rights by reducing the global burden of unnecessary illness, disability and death associated with pregnancy, childbirth and the neonatal period. However, the strategy of the WHO Making Pregnancy Safer initiative is to work with the health sector, focusing on effective evidence-based interventions that target the major causes of maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality, through strengthening the health systems and identifying actions at the community level needed to ensure that women and their newborns have access to the care they need, when they need it; Particular importance is placed on skilled attendance at delivery and the provision of an appropriate and effective continuum of care.

The Making Pregnancy Safer initiative will contribute to the internationally agreed targets towards the reduction of maternal and infant mortality, by building upon the work of the many partners involved and maximizing on key areas of work that lie within WHO's mandate and in which WHO has a comparative advantage. The mission of the WHO Making Pregnancy Safer initiative is therefore to ensure that:

Governments and partner agencies receive guidance, advocacy, and technical support to ensure that safe motherhood is prioritized within their policies and budgets, and that evidence-based norms and standards of care are appropriately applied.

The Making Pregnancy Safer initiative will operate at global, regional and country levels, working through national and international partners in-line with WHO's Country Co-operation Strategies. The initiative represents a key WHO contribution to new global movements in international health and development, notably poverty reduction strategies (including the Massive Effort to address the diseases of poverty), sector-wide approaches and health sector reform. Its implementation will involve strong links to other health programmes that deal with issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI), immunisation and nutrition.

To achieve its Making Pregnancy Safer objectives, WHO will focus on six areas of work:

- **Providing technical and policy support and strengthening government capacity** to plan, design and implement effective evidence-based technical and health system interventions, as well as to identify the necessary actions at the community level to improve maternal and newborn health. The initiative has begun in ten spotlight countries where Making Pregnancy Safer is building upon already existing efforts. The lessons learned will be carefully documented so that the experiences can be shared with other countries.
- **Advocating** support among interested parties at global, regional and country levels, to increase resources, promote consistent, ethical and evidence-based policies, and ensure that safe motherhood is kept high on the international and development agenda.
- **Building effective partnerships** among global, regional and national partners in order to maximize available resources and ensure better coordination of maternal and newborn health plans and activities.
- **Establishing norms and standards and developing tools** for maternal and newborn health care, and supporting countries and partners in adapting them for local use and special circumstances (such as complex emergencies) with a focus on highly vulnerable populations.

- **Promoting, coordinating research and disseminating findings** in areas that are crucial to improve maternal and newborn health.
- **Monitoring and evaluating** implementation of the work supported by the Making Pregnancy Safer initiative, including assessments of maternal and newborn health programmes. The initiative will also provide global monitoring of maternal and perinatal health indicators in order to monitor progress towards universally agreed goals and milestones.

Maternal and newborn deaths, ill-health, and unwanted pregnancy, are major human development issues. The success of any strategy to improve maternal and newborn health depends upon the extent to which the broad range of international, regional and national bodies can make contributions that promote appropriate and flexible approaches. This will require new mechanisms of working together in order to make the long overdue impact on reducing maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity.