

KEEPING MOTHERS HEALTHY: HOW ARE WE DOING?

Optimizing women's health during pregnancy and birth so they can take care of their children is a priority for the United Nations. That's why they made a 75% reduction in maternal mortality rate (MMR), one of eight Millennium Development Goals toward ending poverty worldwide.

So, how are we doing? That's what Nicholas J. Kassebaum, MD, from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington is monitoring, in collaboration with experts worldwide, including those from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Results published in September 2014 in *The Lancet* reveal a mixed picture. Some countries, like China, are doing tremendously well, says Dr. Kassebaum. They are managing to lower MMR rates with strategies that are known to work, including having women give birth in

specially-designated facilities or at least with a skilled attendant present, even for straightforward deliveries. Some promising interventions have failed to show strong benefits, but Dr. Kassebaum warns against abandoning them too soon. For instance, the benefits of emergency obstetric care (EmOC) may be difficult to demonstrate at the population level when its quality and coverage remains inconsistent from region to region, but that means it should be improved, not abandoned. Similarly, it is logical to assume that "getting women on the radar of health care is a good thing," even

if hard data on the mortality benefits of routine antenatal care are lacking. Even simple interventions are beneficial, such as teaching women to recognize when they may be having pregnancy or labour problems so that they can seek out help in a timely manner.

Some regions, particularly Central and Western Africa and regions around the Horn of Africa, are still struggling. They must concentrate on developing integrated delivery and emergency services so that women who are having complications get the life-saving care they need, says Dr. Kassebaum.

An interactive visual representation of the world's progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals can be found at vizhub.healthdata.org/mdg. 📊

BY ALISON PALKHIVALA

Ref.: Kassebaum NJ, Bertozzi-Villa A, Coggeshall MS, et al. Global, regional, and national levels and causes of maternal mortality during 1990-2013: A systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2013. *The Lancet* 2014;384(9947):980-1004. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)60696-6.



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Editors:
Collaborators:
Scientific Proofreading:

Kristell Le Martret, Richard E. Tremblay and Michel Boivin
Eve Krakow, Alison Palkhivala
Petra C. Arck, Marco Battaglia, Zulfiqar Bhutta,
Jean-Yves Frappier, K. S. Joseph, Sherif Karama,
Nicholas J. Kassebaum, Michael Kobor, Michael S. Kramer,
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Hannah Schreier, Jean Séguin, Ross Thompson, Rosalind Wright,
Stanley Zlotkin
Lana Crossman
Guylaine Couture
SIUM

Copy Editor:
Layout:
Printing:

Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development
Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development
Université de Montréal
3050, Édouard-Montpetit Blvd., GRIP
P.O. Box 6128, succursale Centre-ville
Montreal, Quebec H3C 3J7

Telephone: 514 343-6111, extension 2541
Fax: 514 343-6962
E-mail: cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca
Web sites: www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca
www.skc-eecd.ca

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