Safe Motherhood

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Motherhood, an end and a means

With particular reference to Egypt, the author outlines the hazards facing women during pregnancy and childbirth in developing countries, and discusses the measures needed to improve the situation.

The United Nations family of organizations has given safe motherhood great attention and there is now a widespread awareness of its importance. Egypt has taken this issue most seriously, having devoted much of its scientific knowledge and potential to it, and having hosted several meetings and seminars on the subject. Concern for mother and child is both a question of moral integrity and also a prerequisite for development in the economic, social and political fields.

It used to be thought that economic development led automatically to improved health conditions, but experience has demonstrated that this is not necessarily so. Maternal mortality is a matter of grave concern in developing countries, where it accounts for 25% of all deaths among women of childbearing age. Millions of mothers face the risk of death during pregnancy or childbirth. The health of a child depends on that of its mother, and it should be remembered that the protection of a mother’s health requires all her needs to be met. In developing countries there is a need for greater awareness, proper planning, and appropriate efforts in this matter, particularly with regard to the implementation of programmes. Mothers’ requirements are enormous, especially in terms of primary health care and referral of high-risk individuals to specialized centres for safe delivery. Maternal mortality and morbidity associated with complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the worst manifestations of poverty and deprivation. Fewer than 1% of maternal deaths occur in developed countries, and when a woman in a developing country is pregnant the risk of death she faces is many times greater than in an affluent society. Moreover, she is exposed to that risk for a greater part of her life than her counterpart in the developed world. These indicators should serve as incentives for sound planning,

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World Health Forum  Vol. 10  1989
comprehensive economic development, and national demographic and social policies to ensure safe pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood.

The importance of exchanging experience and benefiting from the expertise of others is recognized by all, but attention must be paid to the specific features of every situation. In each country, local circumstances should be examined and guidelines and principles arrived at for tackling the problems of mothers; consideration has to be given to cultural and economic factors as well as to the interactions and interrelationships between problems faced by families.

In Egypt, preliminary studies on maternal health have shown that circulatory disorders and parasitic diseases in general, and haemorrhage, anaemia, puerperal fever and complications of childbirth in particular, as well as health problems related to frequent pregnancies and births, are the main causes of maternal mortality during pregnancy and childbirth. Appropriate, scientifically sound procedures and greater attention to curative care might prove the answer to these hazards. Moreover, significant information on the health status of women is provided by indicators of their social and economic status, including nutrition levels related to family income, education, age at marriage, fertility, and number of children. The traditional birth attendant or dai system is important, as most births occur without proper medical supervision; this is another substantial problem meriting special attention and decisive action.

Among the fields where it is hoped to achieve more positive results is that of the provision of integrated care to families; in addition to health care services, this includes education, safe drinking-water, family planning and appropriate housing. Attention should be given to the question of women at work and to the role of health education and information for women and families. It is also necessary to establish appropriate and efficient maternal health centres in all parts of the country.

Maternal health care requires a comprehensive plan at the national level. In Egypt we have set up the National Council for Motherhood and Childhood, which is endeavouring to create the right economic, social, and health climate for safe motherhood. Behind every smiling child there should be a mother who is physically and mentally healthy and looks to the future with confidence and satisfaction.