WHO on 

Making motherhood safer

"F or many of the 150 million women who become pregnant every year, childbirth is not the joyous event it should be but a time of pain, fear, suffering and even death," Dr Tomris Turmen, Director of WHO's Division of Family Health, told a meeting of the Technical Working Group on the Care of Mother and Baby at the Health Centre, held in Geneva in July. The Group is charged with finding ways to make health care accessible to all and with defining the minimal maternal and child care that each health centre should be able to offer.

Countries sometimes devote up to 80% of their public health spending to high-technology interventions which are of low cost-effectiveness, while most of the needs could be met at much lower cost and more effectively by providing essential curative and preventive care at the health centre or clinic which serves the community, yet which today receives only a tiny share of investment.

A birth is a delicate event for the human species and entails certain risks. Yet more than 56 million deliveries take place each year without any skilled help – in many cases the mother is completely alone with her baby.

Up to one in three pregnancies (not counting abortions) develop complications, such as haemorrhage, sepsis, hypertensive disorders and obstructed labour, and half of these – around 23 million – need skilled treatment. Around 12.5 million pregnancies are complicated by a disease such as malaria, hepatitis, tuberculosis or diabetes. For half a million women every year such complications prove fatal, and when the mother dies the risk of death for surviving children – especially for girls – increases by up to 50%. Some 15 million women develop long-term disabilities such as obstetric fistulae (constant leaking of urine or faeces due to severe damage to the birth canal), severe anaemia, pelvic inflammatory diseases, reproductive tract infections and infertility. In addition, at least 26 million unsafe abortions each year are carried out under unhygienic conditions and these result in death, infections or bleeding.

Complications that affect women during pregnancy and delivery also affect the fetus. Of the 12.9 million deaths a year of children under five, around one-third occur before the baby is one month old and three million occur during the first week of life, largely as a consequence of poorly managed pregnancies or inadequate care of the baby during the first critical hours of life. Many millions of
babies who survive the birth process are badly damaged. For example, some 3% of newborn babies (3.6 million) suffer moderate or severe birth asphyxia following obstructed labour. Of these, about 800,000 die and an equal number suffer brain damage leading to cerebral palsy, seizures and serious learning disorders.

Complications can happen to any woman at any stage of the pregnancy and they can be fatal in a matter of hours. Yet most families in developing countries, particularly in rural areas, live far from a hospital and transport is rarely available. The only way to significantly reduce maternal and newborn deaths therefore is to ensure that the skilled care which women need is available as close as possible to where they live, and that those most in need are identified. This is precisely the function of the community health centre.

WHO's policy aims to strengthen such centres. As Dr Türmen made clear: "Many life-saving procedures can and should be performed by midwives and other non-physician health workers in more peripheral, less sophisticated centres." The health centre has a community-oriented role and is the best place to inform, educate and take care of women and children's health needs effectively and at low cost.

Making a basic package of prenatal, delivery and postpartum care available to 80% of the developing world's women and newborn babies would cost US$4 to $9 per capita, and would reduce the burden of pregnancy-related mortality and ill-health by two-thirds. This is a small price to pay considering that the total health expenditure per person in developing countries in 1990 was estimated at $41 per annum. The moment of birth lays the foundation for a healthy childhood and adult life. Every woman in labour and every infant struggling to be born should have access to simple and appropriate diagnosis and treatment to ensure not only their survival but also their quality of life.

Skilled care for the family close to where they live.

In the next issue

How can a family keep healthy? What can it do to stand guard against disease and protect the health of each individual? The November-December 1993 issue of World Health will try to answer these vital questions in the context of the UN's Year of the Family – 1994. In this same issue the well-known Chinese-born writer Han Suyin describes her vision of the family of the future.