

Community

India Canada Friendship Circle talk on Maternal Newborn Care – A Global Challenge

February 12, 2015



by Ms. Roohi Ahmed

A life-threatening pregnancy? A newborn with a 50-50 chance of survival?

In first-world countries like Canada, these questions are far less frequent as the joy of pregnancy and childbirth are the norm. However, in developing countries, pregnancy and child-birth are instead fraught with risk and loss of life.

Attributing these concerns to the lack of advanced medical equipment and techniques in developing countries would be a gross over-simplification; rather, infant mortality rates can be easily reduced with basic medical training and supplies.

The issue of newborn care and infant mortality was brought into focus by the India Canada Friendship Circle (ICFC) at their last event – a fireside chat with Dr. Pradeep Merchant, site chief, Division of Neonatology with the Ottawa Hospital-Civic Campus and assistant professor with the Department of Pediatrics. The discussion centred on the compassion and dedication of medical professionals who make life-altering decisions every minute of every day when delivering a newborn into this world.

The chair of the ICFC meeting recounted the story of a beautiful empress Mumtaz Mahal who died while giving birth to her 14th child. Stricken with grief, her husband constructed a monument in her memory so majestic that no one would ever guess it was a tomb – the Taj Mahal.

While the Taj Mahal is world famous, there is far less global awareness of the tragedy that led to its creation. Nearly four centuries after this tragic incident, about 800 women die from pregnancy – or childbirth – related complications around the world every day, despite medical advances of the modern age.

According to the World Health Organization, two-thirds of neonatal deaths (first 28 days of life) occur in just ten countries, with India accounting for more than a quarter. More specifically, Dr. Merchant illustrated that with 1.8 million deaths among children under 5 years, and 68,000 deaths among mothers every year, and 52 million children who are stunted, India's burden of reproductive health, and child health and nutrition is greater than that in any other country.

As outlined by Dr. Merchant, the major causes of maternal deaths include hemorrhage, obstructed labour, hypertensive disorders in pregnancy, complications of unsafe abortion, infection and unhygienic conditions at birth (major cause of both infant and maternal deaths). Birth-related disabilities, such as injuries to pelvic muscles, organs or the spinal cord, affect many more women and continue to go untreated. Prematurity, neonatal asphyxia, sepsis and low birth weights are the main causes of neonatal mortality. Malaria, measles, diarrhea and HIV infection pose additional risks to mother and newborn.

UNICEF reports at least 20 per cent of the burden of disease in children below the age of five is related to poor maternal health and nutrition, as well as quality of care at delivery. According to Dr. Merchant, newborn action plans depend on better data collection, use, and their link to accountability. Nearly six million births, stillbirths and neonatal deaths each year are never recorded and there is no standard metrics for counting these. In looking to the future, Dr. Merchant suggested that almost all maternal deaths are preventable and neonatal deaths can be minimized with the right policy choices, distribution of resources and commitment.

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priority. In May 2014, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Canada's commitment of \$3.5 billion to improve the health of mothers and children and supporting global efforts to end the preventable deaths of mothers, newborn and children under five.

India is failing to meet its national and MDG targets in maternal and newborn care due to social inequities and inadequate planning, financing, human resources, infrastructure, supply systems, governance, information and monitoring and lack of attention to rural health care. Dr. Merchant stressed that this needs political commitment of the highest order and the development of a people's movement.

The ICFC will host its next lecture by Mrs. Jayshree Thakar on "Habitat for Humanity" on March 29, 2015 at Palki Cuisine of India on Ogilvie Road.

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