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'No woman should die giving life'

The health of mothers and babies is the foundation of healthy families and communities, helping ensure hopeful futures for us all. A maternal death is defined by WHO as the "death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and the site of the pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes".

This year's World Health Day (7th April 2025) – which marks 5 years from the Sustainable Development Goals deadline — will kick off a year-long campaign titled **Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures**, focussed on maternal and newborn health.

A recent scientific study - multi-strategy systematic review to identify causes of maternal deaths occurring in 2009–20 - published in the Lancet Global Health, is WHO's first global update on the causes of maternal deaths since the SDG were adopted in 2015. [Global and regional causes of maternal deaths 2009–20: a WHO systematic analysis, by Cresswell J A, Alexander M, Chong M Y C, Link H M, Pejchinovska M, Gazeley U, et al March 2025] Haemorrhage – severe heavy bleeding – and hypertensive disorders like preeclampsia are the leading causes of maternal deaths globally, according to this new study. These conditions were responsible for around 80,000 and 50,000 fatalities respectively in 2020, highlighting that many women still lack access to lifesaving treatments and effective care during and after pregnancy and birth.

In addition to outlining the major direct obstetric causes, it shows that other health conditions, including both infectious and chronic diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, anaemias, and diabetes, underpin nearly a quarter (23%) of pregnancy and childbirth-

related mortality. These conditions, which often go undetected or untreated until major complications occur, exacerbate risk and complicate pregnancies for millions of women around the world.

To avoid maternal deaths, it is vital to prevent unintended pregnancies providing adequate access to contraception. Most maternal deaths are preventable, as the health-care solutions to prevent or manage complications are well known. All women need access to high quality care in pregnancy, and during and after childbirth. Maternal health and newborn health are closely linked. It is particularly important that all births are attended by skilled health professionals.

Factors that prevent women from receiving or seeking care during pregnancy and childbirth are:

- health system failures that translate to (i) poor quality of care, including disrespect, mistreatment and abuse, (ii); insufficient numbers of and inadequately trained health workers, (iii); shortages of essential medical supplies; and (iv) the poor accountability of health systems;
- social determinants, including income, access to education, race and ethnicity, that put some sub-populations at greater risk;
- harmful gender norms and/or inequalities; and
- external factors contributing to instability and health system fragility, such as climate and humanitarian crises.

To improve maternal health, barriers that limit access to quality maternal health services must be identified and addressed at both health system and societal levels.

[Source: WHO Website, Lancet]

Dr. Prasad Waingankar