

Frontline Health Workers:

Saving Newborn Lives

Syafрина, 25, had a difficult labor while giving birth to her first child. She lived in a remote village in Aceh, Indonesia, but she was fortunate to have a dedicated, knowledgeable midwife named Desita nearby, who was trained under a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported program. During labor, Desita suspected something was wrong and urged Syafрина to go to the village health center where it would be easier to manage complications. “The baby [has] the umbilical cord wrapped around her. It took two hours, but eventually I delivered the baby,” said Desita. Baby Naisa, a beautiful little girl, weighed 7.7 pounds at birth.¹

The neonatal period – encompassing the first 28 days of life – is the most crucial window of time for a child’s survival. In 2012, 2.9 million babies died in the first 28 days, representing two out of every five child deaths.² Of these, 1 million babies died within the first 24 hours following birth.² Little is known about the causes and mechanisms of preterm birth, which is the leading cause of neonatal death. Continued research investment by the U.S. and others will lead to interventions to prevent these deaths. The other major causes of neonatal deaths include complications during birth and post-natal infections.²

Every year, 40 million women give birth without support from anyone with professional qualifications.² Women from the poorest communities and most remote areas are the least likely to have a skilled birth attendant present at birth and are at the highest at risk of losing their babies.² Newborn mortality can largely be prevented by ensuring that skilled birth attendance is available when and where the risks are greatest.

U.S. Leadership Has Improved Health Outcomes

The U.S. plays an essential role in advancing newborn survival. U.S. contributions to addressing newborn mortality and research on causes of newborn mortality has led to significant reductions in neonatal deaths in many countries. The U.S. also led 176 governments in committing to sharpen country plans to end preventable child deaths.³ More recently, the U.S. has been a part of a global community with other countries and organizations in drafting the Every Newborn Action Plan (ENAP), which set targets for reducing preventable newborn deaths around the world.



Desita, a midwife, teaches Syafрина how to breastfeed her baby. Photo courtesy of Save the Children

Frontline health workers (FHWs) provide services directly to communities where they are most needed, especially in remote and rural areas. Many are community health workers and midwives, though they can also include local pharmacists, nurses and doctors who serve in community clinics.

U.S. Leadership for Newborns Worldwide

The United States is the largest donor to newborn programs around the world, and its efforts have significantly contributed to the following:

- Reducing the number of child deaths by roughly 50% between 1990 and 2012 – that means 15,000 fewer children dying each day.⁴
- Reducing neonatal mortality in Bangladesh by 23%, by supporting programs to scale-up the distribution of chlorhexidine (CHX), a low-cost antiseptic that can prevent neonatal infection when applied after birth.⁴
- Rolling out training of lower-level health workers to manage asphyxia, a leading cause of newborn mortality in 24 partner countries.⁴
- Endorsing a simplified approach to managing the third stage of labor – which can result in hemorrhage or death – so that care can be provided by lower-level health workers.⁴

U.S. Supported Health Workforce Strengthening

USAID has invested in building the capacity of health workers globally:

- Saving Mothers, Giving Life provided training to thousands of health workers in Zambia and Uganda on how to educate women about the importance of giving birth in a health facility with a skilled birth attendant present.⁵
- In Ethiopia, USAID’s flagship Maternal and Child Health Integrated Program (MCHIP) has supported capacity building on Essential Newborn Care (ENC) procedures.⁶
- USAID and other partners support Helping Babies Breathe (HBB), which teaches resuscitation techniques to birth attendants to reduce the amount of preventable deaths from birth asphyxia. Asphyxia-related neonatal deaths were reduced by 50% as a result of the HBB training program in Kenya and Bangladesh.⁴

1: Save the Children. (2013) Surviving the First Day: State of the World’s Mothers. http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebe-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/SOWM-FULL-REPORT_2013.PDF
 2: Save the Children. (2014) Ending Newborn Deaths. <http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebe-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/ENDING-NEWBORN-DEATHS.PDF>
 3: UNICEF. (2013) Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed, Progress Report. http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/APR_Progress_Report_2013_9_Sept_2013.pdf
 4: USAID. (2013) USAID Health-Related Research and Development Progress Report. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/Health%20Research%20Report.pdf>
 5: Saving Mothers Giving Life. (2013) Making Pregnancy and Childbirth Safer in Uganda & Zambia, Annual Report. <http://www.savingmothersgivinglife.org/doc/SMGL%20Annual%20Report%202013.pdf>
 6: USAID. MCHIP: Newborn Health. Retrieved 04/18/14: <http://www.mchip.net/Newborn%20Health>

Health Workers Expand Access to Neonatal Health Services

The contribution of Frontline Health Workers (FHWs) is crucial in reducing the toll of neonatal deaths. FHWs can provide a tremendous amount of support around eight essential interventions, including skilled birth attendance, management of premature births, basic newborn care, neonatal resuscitation, skin-to-skin contact (kangaroo mother care), treatment of severe neonatal infections, in-patient care and prevention of mother-to child transmission of HIV. Roughly two-thirds of newborn deaths could be prevented if skilled health workers performed utilized these effective care techniques during the neonatal period.³

The Crucial Role of Frontline Health Workers in Reducing Newborn Deaths



Current estimated global shortage of doctors, nurses and midwives needed to deliver basic services

1 million:



Babies who did not survive their first day of life in 2012²



950,000: newborn deaths that could be prevented each year if essential health services were more equitably distributed²

43% ↓

Reduction of newborn deaths that could occur with skilled care during labor²



How the U.S. Can Accelerate Progress

Although great strides have been made, substantial reforms are needed to ensure that there are enough skilled health workers in place to deliver the services needed to prevent newborn deaths. In order to accelerate progress toward improving newborn survival, the United States government must increase its support for frontline health workers and maximize the impact of existing support for these crucial partners by expanding access to health services.

To this end, the USG should develop and implement a more coordinated and comprehensive strategy on human resources for health that outlines how it will contribute to strengthening the global health workforce to provide neonatal health-related and other essential health services. This plan should include a blueprint for an evidence-based, systematic approach to support recruiting, training, retaining, equipping and supervising frontline health workers across global health programs. The U.S. should also support global efforts to ensure that every birth is attended by trained and equipped health workers who can deliver quality care, including essential newborn health interventions.

About Us

The Frontline Health Workers Coalition is an alliance of United States-based organizations working together to urge greater and more strategic U.S. investment in frontline health workers in developing countries as a cost-effective way to save lives and foster a healthier, safer and more prosperous world.

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