MORE SKILLED MIDWIVES NEEDED TO SAVE WOMEN'S AND NEWBORNS' LIVES

New report calls for strengthening of midwifery services to achieve health Millennium Development Goals 4, 5 and 6 on child survival, maternal health and HIV/AIDS

Geneva | Monday 20 June 2011 The first *State of the World's Midwifery* report confirms the critical role midwives play in improving maternal and newborn health and survival. It highlights the shortage of skilled midwives in many low-income countries, stressing the need to train and deploy more midwives in all parts of a country - especially remote and rural areas.

The report, commissioned and coordinated by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), was launched at the Triennial Congress of the International Confederation of Midwives in Durban, South Africa today.

Every year 358 000 women and 3.6 million newborn babies die due to largely preventable complications during pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period. In addition, every year, nearly 3 million babies are stillborn. Most of these deaths occur in low-income countries and happen because women – often poor and marginalized – have no access to functioning health facilities or to qualified health professionals, notably midwives and others with midwifery skills.

"If we want to stop these women and babies dying, we need to invest in skilled care," says Dr Flavia Bustreo, Assistant Director-General for Family and Community Health at the World Health Organization (WHO), one of the 30 organizations involved in producing the report. "Midwives can provide such care in communities and primary health care services. They can also link women up with emergency obstetric care services if they need them."

The report surveyed 58 countries, which together represent just under 60 per cent of all births worldwide, but 91 per cent of all maternal deaths. Among the 38 countries most desperately in need of midwives, 22 need to double the workforce by 2015; seven need to triple or quadruple it; and nine countries - Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Niger, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan - need to dramatically scale up midwifery by a factor of between 6 and 15. The report estimates that countries require a minimum of six skilled birth attendants per 1,000 births if they are to achieve the aim of 95 per cent coverage.

"WHO and its partners are working closely with countries to strengthen midwifery education, to increase access and to improve the quality of midwifery services," explains Dr Elizabeth Mason, Director of the WHO Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health.

Increasing women’s access to quality midwifery has become a focus of global efforts to realize the right of every woman to the best possible health care during pregnancy and childbirth. It is also at the heart of three health-related Millennium Development Goals – reduce child death (MDG 4), improve maternal health (MDG 5) and fight AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6).

The report builds on prior initiatives to strengthen midwifery worldwide. These include the joint statement by WHO, the International Confederation of Midwives and and the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics on Making Pregnancy Safer (2004) and the World Health Report 2005.

More information is available at www.stateoftheworldsmidwifery.org , where the full report will be posted on 20 June as soon as the embargo is lifted at 12 noon Durban/Geneva time, 6 a.m. in New York and 11 a.m. in London