

# **AWARENESS OF FAMILY PLANNING THAT REDUCES CHILD MORTALITY**

**By RFPD Chairman Salem Mashhour**

## **Presentation at the RI Presidential Conference on Membership and Child Mortality Cairo 6-8 Feb. 2009**

A child deserves to be born into a loving family. Giving women access to family planning allows them to plan the right time to have a child, when they can love it with all their heart. Yet surveys show that approximately one out of three pregnancies is unwanted. Over 300 million couples wish to limit their family size, but do not have access to family planning.

Family planning increases the chances of survival of both mother and child. A planned family is the best environment for the child's overall development, making it possible for them to develop to their full potential and to grow into healthy adults. Spacing of children allows both mother and child to remain healthy during these critical years.

### **Family Planning Impact and Benefits**

Maternal and child deaths in developing countries are unacceptably high. In fact, universal access to contraceptives could prevent nearly half of all maternal deaths and significantly reduce infant deaths.

### **The link between expanded access to family planning and increased maternal and child survival is well-established:**

1. Women and their babies are healthier when mothers are able to plan and space the amount of time between births.
2. When women deliver babies too soon after a previous birth, those babies are often born underweight or premature, increasing their chances of dying in infancy.
3. Children born less than two years after a previous birth are 2.5 times more likely to die than children born three to five years apart.
4. Children born to mothers under age 18 have a 60% greater chance of dying in the first year of life than a child born to a mother over

- age 19, as well as a greater chance of dying before age
5. Girls under age 15 are five times as likely to die during child birth
  6. Unintended and unwanted pregnancies are a major cause of maternal mortality.
  7. Access to reproductive health services, including contraception as well as care in pregnancy and childbirth, reduces a woman's exposure to fatal obstetric complications -which account for **approximately 80% of maternal deaths** globally- and enables a woman to plan the timing and spacing of her children.

A review of 17 West African countries found that those with the highest contraceptive prevalence have the lowest maternal mortality rates, and vice versa.

## **Reducing Unintended Pregnancies and Abortion**

Access to Family Planning and contraception is essential in reducing unintended pregnancies and reducing rates of abortion. Every year nearly 80 millions unintended pregnancies occur worldwide. More than half of these pregnancies end in abortion, often in countries where abortion is illegal and unsafe and access to contraception is limited.

When long-term effective family planning methods are available and accessible to the majority of a population, abortion rates decline - sometimes drastically, as most women have not to rely on abortion as a means of controlling their fertility.

## **Preventing HIV/AIDS**

Family planning services are paramount to preventing HIV infections among women in childbearing age and helping HIV-positive mothers avoid unintended pregnancies. Each year, **420,000 children** around the world are infected with HIV -over **90%** through mother-to-child-transmission, totaling **2.5 million children living with HIV or AIDS today**. Access to reproductive health services, including contraception, is crucial in reducing these numbers by preventing HIV infection in women and unintended pregnancies among HIV-positive women who do not wish to become pregnant. **Current levels of contraceptive use in sub-Saharan**

**Africa, as low as they are, are already preventing an estimated 22% of HIV-positive births.**

**Fellow Rotarians:**

There is an enormous and well documented unmet need for family planning, especially among the two billion people who live on less than \$2 a day. It is clear that the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are difficult or impossible to achieve without **a renewed focus on, and investment, in family planning.**

**Family planning is wanted and it works.** Whenever high-quality contraceptive services have been made available with **supporting information**, the birth rate has fallen, even among low-income populations. Evidence shows that when family planning is easy to obtain, and free of barriers, both educated and uneducated women use contraception at the same rate, opening the door to reduction in poverty.

**Many women in Africa and South Asia** have hesitated to use family planning because they believe contraception is medically more dangerous than having another child, or will cause infertility later in life. There is increasing evidence that when women find there is a safe way to have control over whether and when to have another child, they often express a desire for a smaller family.

**In Conclusion:**

There is an obvious need **to raise awareness and improve information and education** about the benefits of family planning. Religious opposition to family planning or cultural practices, such as child marriage and the desire of large families, are prevalent and it is vital to gain support at all levels of society (**from national government to community and religious leaders**) to develop new strategies to improve maternal health and to support people's choice regarding the size of their families and the spacing of their children.

In all countries adversely affected by high fertility rates it is urgently needed to press governments to develop a comprehensive national plan for providing universal access to voluntary family planning services, including relevant education services, especially educating women and girls.

**Family planning is one of the most cost effective ways** of reducing infant mortality, but governments in countries with high fertility – and thus significant population growth- find it difficult to keep up with the demand for health services that help save children's lives.

For the most effective care, a continuum linking maternal, **newborn and child health care** through the lifecycle and between homes and health facilities is needed.

Half of African women and their babies do not receive skilled care during childbirth, and even fewer receive effective postnatal care. This is also the crucial time for other interventions, especially prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and initiation of breastfeeding.

Additionally, poor families who are more at risk are the least likely to have access to care, especially more complex hospital care for emergencies.

**To ensure that children thrive, all of us have an important part to play along the continuum of care.**