

Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health

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There is no better time than now to show the world Canada's commitment to saving the lives of women, newborns, and children around the world.

With the Olympics and the G8 and G20 Summits well behind us, the world's spotlight has shifted away from Canada. In late September, all eyes were on New York, where the United Nations held a major summit meeting to review progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), eight highly ambitious goals to address some of the world's most pressing issues. Although the MDGs have seen progress on many fronts, the target that has seen the least progress is MDG 5, the goal of reducing maternal mortality by three quarters by 2015. Ten years have passed since the Millennium Development Goals were established, and yet nearly half a million women continue to die each year from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.

Dr Mahmoud Fathalla, FIGO President from 1994 to 1997, eloquently stated, "Women are not dying because of a disease we cannot treat. . . . They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving."¹ For far too long it seems that the lives of women were simply not seen to be worth saving . . . *until now*.

What began with the G8's Muskoka Initiative on Maternal and Child Health, led by our own Prime Minister Stephen Harper, has now grown into much more. During the recent UN MDG Summit, there were major announcements of investment towards maternal and child health (of nearly \$40 billion), and the UN Secretary General himself launched a Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health. This increased global focus on MDG 5, and the additional funding being made available is very welcome indeed.

With this increased attention on maternal and child health, we are presented with a great window of opportunity. By capitalizing on Canada's expertise in the field of maternal and child health, we can work together with the Canadian government to implement cost-effective strategies that will

have a real impact in reducing the number of unnecessary deaths among women and children. For example, the number of cases of postpartum hemorrhage, the most common cause of maternal mortality, could be cut dramatically by ensuring access to essential medicines such as misoprostol, and by supporting the training of health professionals at all levels.

As discussions continue about the next federal budget, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada encourages Prime Minister Harper to ensure that Canada's commitments to maternal, newborn, and child health are reflected in this budget. We also urge the government to come up with a detailed plan of action without further delay.

Since the Muskoka Initiative was announced, there has yet to be a strategy revealed for how the funds will be used and what role Canada is willing to take in order to prevent the deaths of millions of women, newborns, and children every year. With only five years left to achieve the MDGs before the target date of 2015, time is running out.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada has consulted with the Canadian International Development Agency and with Minister of International Cooperation Bev Oda, and has made the following recommendations based on our first hand experience working with partner obstetrician-gynaecologist societies in low-resource countries:

- Prioritize training of health professionals, especially in the area of emergency obstetric care;
- Provide support to professional health associations so that they can contribute to the implementation of national health plans while building training and practice standards that will provide the basis for strong, sustainable health systems;
- Join the global efforts to fill the unmet need for family planning and contraceptives;
- Allocate funding in a way that addresses gaps along the continuum of care (from pre-pregnancy to childhood);

- Use a rights-based approach when designing health programs and invest subsequently in efforts to empower and educate women; and
- Ensure the transparency and accountability of how funding is used.

By taking quick and effective action following these recommendations, Canada can take the lead in initiating real progress in the countries that need it most. If we can achieve this goal, then perhaps the spotlight will once again turn to Canada, not for our ability to host grand events, but for our

ability and determination to make real changes of the same magnitude in the lives of women and children around the world.

I ask all of our members and colleagues to join us in the fight against maternal and newborn mortality.

REFERENCE

1. Fathalla M. International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics World Congress. Copenhagen; 1997.