Beyond the Numbers

Reviewing maternal deaths and complications to make pregnancy safer

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Acknowledgements

The impetus for this document arose during a series of inter-regional meetings on monitoring maternal mortality organised by WHO Headquarters and Regional Offices during 1998 and 1999. At these meetings, participants stressed that measuring the levels of maternal mortality was not enough and called for methods and approaches that would help elucidate the underlying causes of maternal deaths and identify what could be done to avert them. *Beyond the numbers* is a response to such calls.

Many talented and committed individuals have contributed to *Beyond the numbers.* Authors of specific approaches, named in each relevant chapter, are Cynthia Berg, Colin Bullough, Jean-François Etard, Veronique Filippi, Wendy Graham, Gwyneth Lewis, Carine Ronsmans and Gijs Walraven.

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Foreword

Pregnancy is a normal, healthy state which most women aspire to at some point in their lives. Yet this normal, life-affirming process carries with it serious risks of death and disability. The statement that worldwide, over half a million young women die every year as a result of complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth has been repeated so often that it no longer shocks. Yet most of these deaths could be avoided if preventive measures were taken and adequate care available. For every woman who dies, many more suffer from serious conditions that can affect them for the rest of their lives.

The international health and development community has repeatedly called for action to address this problem and governments have formally committed themselves to doing so, notably at the *International Conference on Population and Development* (Cairo 1994) and the *Fourth World Conference on Women* (Beijing 1995) as well as their respective five-year follow up conferences, and more recently in the *Millennium Declaration* in 2000. Improvement of maternal health is enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals as one of the essential prerequisites for development and for poverty reduction.

Maternal mortality offers a litmus test of the status of women, their access to health care, and the adequacy of the health care system in responding to their needs. However, it is difficult to measure, particularly where civil registration of deaths and of causes of deaths is weak. Different approaches have been developed for measuring maternal mortality in such circumstances but they are of limited use for regular, short-term monitoring.

Furthermore, the information that countries need to address maternal mortality goes beyond just measuring the level of the problem. Policy-makers ask "Why do maternal deaths occur and what can be done to prevent them?" Programme managers ask "Where are things going wrong and what can be done to rectify them?" Answering these questions is as important as knowing the precise level of maternal mortality. *Beyond the numbers* proposes ways of finding the answers to such questions and offers diagnostic tools that shed light on what needs to be done to prevent maternal deaths. We hope that all those working in the area of maternal health will find this document useful.

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