

The theme of World Health Day this year, 2005, touches every heart. It is a plea for everyone to make use of every event, every voice, every occasion, to make every mother and child count. In several of the 22 countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for women of childbearing age, and many children do not even reach their fifth birthday. What happens to these women and children is a question we should all ask ourselves. This year's slogan, "Make Every Mother and Child Count" reflects the reality that today, governments—including those in this Region—and the international community need to make the health of women and children a higher priority. Healthy mothers and children are the key to healthy, prosperous societies.

Women play a critical role in the promotive and preventive fields of health, being charged with maintaining and promoting the health of the family. It is the woman who is in control of the selection of food for her family and its preparation in line with health standards, who trains her family in matters of personal hygiene and solid waste disposal, and who decides whether she or anyone in her family needs help from health services. It is critical that women are educated, allowed access to resources and involved in decision-making in order to carry out the priceless services they provide. In fact educational attainment has been found to be the single most influential factor in reducing child morbidity. Education results in greater autonomy for women in directing family matters, less fatalistic attitudes in responding to child illness, and more awareness of health risks and behaviours that reinforce health.

Each year 53 000 mothers in the Region die in childbirth and 1.5 million children under the age of five years die from a handful of preventable and treatable conditions. Up to three-quarters of deaths during the first month and at least 30% to 40% of all infant deaths could be avoided through improved maternal health, adequate nutrition during pregnancy, appropriate management of deliveries, appropriate care of newborn infants and birth spacing.

A woman in poverty is not able to access the educational opportunities of her wealthier counterparts in society and therefore does not have the necessary knowledge to attend to the health needs of herself or her family. She may not realize the significance of immunization, and what impact it has on her children, or understand the health hazards of improper waste disposal, or be able to secure the nutritional needs of her family. Without the knowledge and resources to ensure the health and strength, and therefore the productivity, of her family, the family becomes embroiled in a vicious cycle of poverty and outside intervention is needed to break the cycle.

There is a need to strengthen political and technical leadership and commit financial resources to reach every mother and child with an essential and affordable package of proven interventions. Concentrated efforts are needed to recruit, train and deploy sufficient numbers of skilled health care providers. The process of improving maternal and child health in the Region faces many challenges that have slowed progress in recent years, such as the difficult circumstances of conflict experienced in some countries, which have tremendously affected the health of the population, especially the vulnerable groups of children and mothers. World Health Day is an occasion to stimulate action; we need all of you to help galvanize national governments, international donors, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, the media, community-based groups, and each other to learn about, plan for and undertake sustainable activities that aim to save lives and improve the health and wellbeing of mothers and children.

Let us all join together in celebrating healthy mothers and children—the real wealth of societies—on 7 April 2005.

Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean

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