



WHO obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Nashwa Skaik, who leads the pioneering Early Essential Newborn Care project which assists with 75 per cent of all births in Gaza, has been awarded WHO Director-General's Award of Excellence for her work. Credit: WHO22 December 2019, Gaza – “Families and in particular, mothers and infants, are the essence of any society and they should never be neglected. I am immensely honoured and grateful for this recognition, which is a true reflection of the global and regional efforts to improve mother and newborn health in all settings. This reward is a huge boost to myself and the team in our office,” Dr Nashwa Skaik, WHO's obstetrician and gynaecologist in Gaza, reflects after receiving the WHO Director-General's Award of Excellence for her work managing a pioneering maternal and newborn health care project in the Gaza Strip to prevent and treat the key causes of newborn mortality and diseases.

In Palestine, babies aged less than one month old account for 50 per cent of deaths in children under five. Half of these deaths in babies occur in the first day of life, mainly from complications related to prematurity, birth asphyxia and infection.

Based on international evidence, Dr Nashwa and colleagues at WHO, rolled out the Early Essential Newborn Care project in 2017 with the Ministry of Health in Gaza to ensure that quality essential care is provided during critical moments around birth, in addition to care for premature, low-birthweight and sick babies.



The project has strengthened the Ministry of Health's system from the bottom up, by coaching

local clinical staff with a package of simple and cost-effective evidence-based interventions during childbirth and immediately after, and focusing on the elimination of harmful and outdated practices in the first 24 hours of life. This includes reshaping policy and guidelines, managing supplies and staff, and providing health information.

The project now covers 75 per cent of all births in Gaza in maternity and neonatal units in four targeted hospitals and widespread adoption has resulted in significant improvements since 2017 in key areas including the following.

Early and exclusive breastfeeding: take up improved from 21% to 52.5% from 2017 to 2019. These practices, where infants receive breastmilk within one hour of birth and where they only receive breastmilk without additional food or drink, are known to lower newborn deaths by 22%. Breastfeeding protects the baby from common childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea and pneumonia and may also have longer-term health benefits, such as reducing the risk of overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence.

Babies receiving sustained skin-to-skin contact: this increased from 0% to 35% from 2017 to 2019. This practice, where a baby is laid directly on their mother's bare chest shortly after birth, is essential for preventing temperature loss and diseases that lead to infection and death. Among infants who received this care, there is a reduction in newborn admission to intensive care due to respiratory problems by 5% in Gaza. In addition, it helps parents bond with their babies and supports better physical and developmental outcomes for the baby.

Dr Skaik said she treasures the opportunities she gets at WHO:

“They are like no other place. I enjoy my everyday work with the team and the space I am given to be more creative and innovative. We try our best to deliver high quality and unique care to all mothers and babies in Gaza, which ensures that they thrive and survive despite the difficult circumstances.”

The WHO team congratulates Dr Skaik and her colleagues for their dedication and achievements in improving the lives of mothers and babies in Gaza.

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