The Weekly
Information Resource Bulletin

Death and illness due to pregnancy and childbirth-related complications is a huge problem around the world. In fact, approximately 210 million women survive childbirth-related complications with devastating disabilities, including obstetric fistula according to the World Health Organization.

WHO estimates there are between 2 and 3.5 million women suffering with OF in the developing world (WHO, 2003; Wall, 2006)

As discussed in previous bulletins, teenage pregnancy can lead to a lot of health problems including fistula.

According to WHO, teenage girls face a higher risk of difficulties in labor than women in their twenties, and these problems could lead to fistula.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To educate listeners about the dangers of early pregnancies
- To help create a positive attitude towards abstinence among young people
- To promote discussion and dialogue between listeners and other community members about the dangers of fistula

The Problem: Fistula

Obstetric fistula is an abnormal opening in the vaginal wall that allows urine and/or feces to leak through the vagina.

Obstetric fistula is caused by obstructed or prolonged labour without skilled medical care.

It is pressure from the baby's skull on the mother's pelvis that causes permanent damage to the vaginal tissue. However, obstetric fistula is preventable and treatable.

The Reproductive Health Unit (RHU) states that in Malawi, accurate national estimates are difficult to calculate, because obstetric fistula is not usually included in standardized population-based surveys. However, Malawi has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world and is estimated at 894 per 100,000 live births. The high maternal mortality suggests that Malawi has a high number of women living with obstetric fistula.

Therefore, young girls should avoid getting pregnant since they are at high risk of suffering from fistula. For example, a study in Nigeria, found that more than 25 percent of fistula patients had become pregnant before the age of 15 and more than 50 percent before the age of 18.

Activities for Journalists

Use your radio station to help your community, especially young people, understand that teenage pregnancy is one of the factors that lead to obstetric fistula and they need to be reminded that it is a dangerous and life-threatening condition.

Make the following points;

Obstetric fistula is both preventable and treatable. It can be prevented if teenage girls wait till they are fully mature to get pregnant. It is also preventable if women who are in labour are provided with adequate and timely emergency care when complications arise.

Communities, and young people in particular, have a great role to play in ensuring there are no cases of fistula in their communities.

Community leaders, traditional authorities, and village heads should be knowledgeable about safe motherhood, pregnancy-related complications in young girls and the importance of delivering their baby at a health facility.

The communities could agree to do the following: no woman should be allowed to give birth by an untrained traditional birth attendant (TBA); all first pregnancies should deliver at a health facility; TBA's to deliver women only according to accepted Ministry of Health guidelines -- from second to fourth pregnancies only, with no history of complications. Finally, all abortion cases should be properly investigated and girls should be encouraged to seek treatment at the hospital.

Have a panel discussion with a traditional leader, two young people and a nurse on the dangers of early pregnancy. Discuss how fistula affects young girls and what communities can do to help those who are already suffering from fistula.

Useful Contacts

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