

Volume 13, Number 18
April 15, 2010

New Global Study Shows Maternal Mortality Significantly Lower Than Previously Thought/Policy Implications Worry Abortion Advocates

By **Susan Yoshihara, Ph.D.** **Austin Ruse**

(NEW YORK – C-FAM) A **new study** out this week by the leading British medical journal shows maternal mortality rates have been significantly overestimated by United Nations (UN) agencies. *The Lancet* reports that maternal deaths worldwide in 2008 totaled 342,900 rather than the 500,000+ used by the World Bank, World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in recent years.

The study finds both that the numbers from WHO and UNICEF were faulty due to a lack of proper reporting and also imprecise statistical modeling. But *The Lancet* study also finds progress has been made in preventing pregnant women from dying.

The study cites four main reasons for the improvement: declining pregnancy rates in some countries, higher per capita income, higher education rates for women, and increasing availability of basic medical care including "skilled birth attendants."

The report finds that HIV/AIDS caused 60,000 maternal deaths and suggests that maternal deaths would have been significantly lower in Africa if mothers were given antiretroviral drugs. This sharply contradicts current UN and Obama administration policies, which divert funding from HIV/AIDS to family planning as a way to reduce maternal deaths.

The study shows that 50% of maternal deaths come from just six countries; India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Researchers were surprised that three of the richest countries in the world actually showed increased maternal mortality: the United States, Canada and Norway, three countries with the most liberal abortion laws in the world.

What was not cited anywhere in the document is abortion. Contrary to this study, the UN has promoted better maternal health through legal, or "safe," abortion. At the UN-sponsored Women Deliver Conference in London two years ago, which was billed as a conference on maternal mortality, abortion advocate Frances Kissling told the Friday Fax the conference was a "pro-choice conference."

The Lancet's editor **Dr. Richard Horton** told the *New York Times* he was pressured "by advocacy groups" to delay publication of the report until later this year. Horton said the groups wanted the information withheld until after the current UN Commission on Population and Development (CPD), the Women Deliver Conference scheduled for this June in Washington DC, and the next UN General Assembly, which is also scheduled to address maternal mortality.

Pro-life critics of the maternal mortality numbers have long complained that the 500,000 number was likely too high and based on ideological assumptions. Dr. Donna Harrison, writing in a C-FAM briefing paper last year, said the WHO introduction of medical abortion in some countries to reduce maternal mortality has been based on unreliable data, unreliability now confirmed by a much broader and more detailed study by *The Lancet*.

Regarding the new *Lancet* study, Harrison, the president of the American Academy of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists (AAPLOG) said, "This study uses the best statistical methods currently available and clearly demonstrates that worldwide legalization of abortion is unnecessary to bring about significant decreases in maternal mortality. AAPLOG encourages UN member nations to continue to develop even better statistical information by improving the identification of maternal mortality causality, especially induced abortion related mortality, which is most often underreported or misrepresented."

There is little doubt that this new study will have a direct impact on the negotiations going on this week at the UN CPD, where the negotiated document on maternal mortality includes dozens

of references to reproductive health, which is used as a codeword for abortion.

Copyright 2010 © Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute

866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 495, New York 10017 - (212) 754-5948 - info@c-fam.org

