Women at risk after pregnancy complications

Women who have almost died in pregnancy are almost five times more likely to die in the four years following their near-miss than those who have had problem-free pregnancies in Burkina Faso, says research in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, published this month in print and on line.

The research, conducted in the west African country by scientists from Norway, the United Kingdom and the host country, showed that those who had suffered complications during pregnancy were at greater risk for all-cause and pregnancy-related death from lack of follow-up care, an unmet need for contraception and other factors such as HIV infection.

In total in the study, 1014 women were recruited after hospital discharge and followed for up to four years: 337 had had near-miss complications and 677 had had uncomplicated pregnancies. After discounting losses to follow-up, 5.3% (15) of the women died in the near-miss group and 0.9% (5) died in the group with uncomplicated pregnancies during the follow-up period.

Johanne Sundby, one of the co-authors of the research from the University of Oslo, Norway, says: “It is a matter of providing affordable care with a long-term perspective, focusing on all health issues that may affect the woman’s well-being. Research has previously addressed maternal mortality and near-miss related to the time of birth itself, but now we also see that some of these women suffer from bad health for a long time and may even be at risk of dying much later than previously demonstrated.”
The World Health Organization (WHO) has standardized the definition of a near-miss case “a woman who nearly died but survived a complication that occurred during pregnancy, childbirth or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy”.

Doris Chou, a medical officer at the World Health Organization, said: “The study highlights several areas of importance for maternal health. It is critical to identify near misses, as they serve as a barometer of the health system. In women for whom a subsequent pregnancy would carry a high risk of death or ill health, access to family planning is essential to avoid future pregnancies that are not intended.

In women who recovered from their near-miss experience, antenatal care with a skilled provider could help to identify and manage risk factors in the subsequent pregnancy. WHO provides support to countries in implementing innovative mechanisms to improve the coverage of maternal health services in order to decrease maternal mortality and morbidity.”

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The *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* is one of the world’s leading public health journals. It is the flagship periodical of WHO, with a special focus on developing countries. Articles are peer-reviewed and are independent of WHO guidelines. Abstracts are now available in the six official languages of the United Nations.

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