Enhancing child survival

Child Health Weeks have been held twice a year in all of Zambia’s 72 districts since 1999. During the health weeks, UNICEF and its partners provide an array of services aimed at enhancing survival prospects for children under five. Besides vaccinations against the major childhood diseases, these services include iron-fortified foods, vitamin A supplements, deworming, growth monitoring, and malaria prevention.

In the past, community health workers involved in Child Health Week have used the opportunity to immunize pregnant women against maternal tetanus, which can result from unsafe birthing conditions and is easily prevented with three doses of tetanus toxoid vaccine. The immunization protects mothers for up to ten years and their newborn babies for the first few critical months of life.

That outreach has now been extended. In a cost-effective effort “to rapidly eliminate MNT,” said Zulu, health workers in the high-risk districts this summer provided counseling and vaccination not only to currently pregnant women but to all those who might bear children in the coming years.

“ Their countless number of chores and responsibilities make it difficult for women to keep up with immunization for their children, let alone for themselves,” noted Edita Nsibuga, UNICEF Zambia communication officer. “ Child Health Week presents an excellent opportunity to prevent and treat the most common childhood diseases, and reminds women to follow up on their tetanus immunization.”

Protecting women of childbearing age against tetanus is one of the simplest ways of making inroads into Zambia’s high maternal mortality rate of 729 deaths per 100,000 live births. More than two-thirds of Zambian mothers — many of whom live in remote rural areas far from clinics and hospitals — deliver their babies at home without help from trained health-care attendants. For these women, clean delivery practices may be lacking and tetanus risks heightened.

Together with other basic health interventions, tetanus immunization has the potential to save the lives of thousands of Zambian women and their newborn children.

CAMPAIGN IN GUINEA

When Guinean health officials were looking for a new approach to protecting mothers and babies from maternal and neonatal tetanus, they sought the help of the same women expectant mothers turn to — traditional birth attendants (TBAs).

For the past three years, the government has worked with UNICEF and its partners to help communities provide training in safe deliveries and proper umbilical cord care for TBAs, who deliver 70 percent of all newborns in Guinea. Local health management teams and health center midwives have so far trained 210 TBAs in 7 of its 30 high-risk districts and plan to educate 210 more this year.

In Guinea’s countryside, home deliveries are so common that some traditional birth attendants perform up to 12 deliveries a month. Recognizing how experienced they are, the TBAs say they find the training sessions valuable.

“The biggest eye-openers for them are that complications can be detected early and that they need to cut the cord with a new disposable razor blade,” said Maurice Hours, UNICEF Health Officer in Guinea.

For ten days, the women in the program are taught hygienic birthing practices, early childhood health and nutrition, and the importance of immunization — not only immunization of babies against childhood diseases, but also immunization of women against tetanus to protect them and their newborns. The TBAs spend three days in class and seven days in the maternity ward of the district hospital. After the training, they are required to check in each month at their local health centers with the midwives who have been their trainers for new supplies and to discuss recent deliveries and any problems they have encountered.

Traditional birth attendants indispensable to campaign

In addition to their role in the safe delivery of babies, traditional birth attendants help health officials by relaying important information to the local women. “ TBAs coordinate meetings between local health workers and new mothers during outreach activities. They also talk to pregnant women about the benefits of prenatal care visits, breastfeeding, and immunization,” Hours said.

The training program has proven to be a key strategy in Guinea’s MNT campaign. Thanks to the intensive ten-day course, TBAs now have skills that have proven to be extremely useful in the local campaigns. Of the 30 high-risk districts, 8 have completed the necessary three rounds of tetanus immunization, reaching 88 percent of all women of childbearing age; 8 other districts are in the process of completing the second round. Meanwhile, plans are under way for next year’s coverage of the 14 remaining districts that will include training 420 midwives.

“Guinea is well on its way to eliminating MNT, and part of the credit goes to the TBAs and the midwives who train them,” said Hours. “Their involvement is indispensable, and by combining the training of TBAs with immunization, Guinea is making huge strides in protecting mothers and babies from this killer disease for years to come.”

MNT Campaign Milestones Since 1999

- 38 countries have developed a plan of action for MNT elimination, and 34 have initiated or expanded tetanus toxoid immunization activities.
- 58 million women of childbearing age have been protected against tetanus, saving thousands of newborns each year who would otherwise have died from neonatal tetanus.
- The World Health Organization has provisionally certified MNT elimination in six African countries (Eritrea, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) and one state in India (Andhra Pradesh).


ON THE FRONTLINES: UNICEF’S BASIL RODRIQUES

Basil Rodriques’s recent trip to Viet Nam has all the earmarks of what he likes most in his job. The Southeast Asian country is poised to eliminate maternal and neonatal tetanus by the end of this year, and as the UNICEF Regional Immunization Officer for the East Asia and the Pacific Rim Office (EAPRO), it’s Rodriques’s duty to monitor progress toward conquering the disease.

“I’m going to review the latest round of data,” said Rodriques before his trip. “Viet Nam’s past performance has been so impressive, I’m confident the goal is in sight. Once the country determines it has eliminated MNT, they will request validation from the World Health Organization.”

Viet Nam’s achievement will be a victory in the MNT elimination campaign and Rodriques’s long career in public health. For the past 23 years, the Jamaican-born Rodriques has dedicated himself to UNICEF’s health and nutrition programs in different locales, ranging from the UNICEF field office in Beijing to its regional office in Katmandu.

Rodriques, forty-three, first began working for UNICEF as a temporary assistant during the executive board session when he was a nineteen-year-old student at New York City’s Queens College. After graduating with a degree in political science, he took a two-year break to study public health and adjunct clinical obstetrics at Columbia University.

He returned to UNICEF after completing his master’s degree, working for UNICEF as a temporary assistant in New York, Geneva, and Beijing before being assigned to the Regional Immunization Office in Bangkok, where he oversees EAPRO’s numerous immunization programs, including MNT.

Although Rodriques, who has two children, has worked on the MNT elimination campaign for the past four years, he has never witnessed a baby stricken by tetanus. He considers this a blessing.

“It means people are getting immunized,” he explained. “But I’ve spoken to women in rural villages who have vividly described the agonizing death of their children from tetanus, and it’s not something you want to see.”

As more countries get closer to eliminating the deadly disease, Rodriques plans to continue working in primary health care and immunization.

“One of the things that has always bothered me is seeing people denied basic health services,” he said. “I want to mobilize as many resources as possible, and get governments to provide essential routine services. If you strengthen these services, more people will be protected from diseases like MNT.”

ZAMBIA’S “CHILD HEALTH WEEK” HELPS WOMEN, TOO

Immunizing women against tetanus, a preventable illness that needlessly takes the lives of as many as 30,000 mothers and 180,000 newborns each year, is actually just one part of a much bigger picture of maternal and child health in the developing world.

This summer, with a nod to that bigger picture, the Zambian Government, UNICEF, and other partners in the southern African nation targeted more than 95,000 women for tetanus immunization as part of a comprehensive “Child Health Week” initiative.

In five districts identified as the last high-risk areas for maternal and neonatal tetanus, Zambia’s latest Child Health Week, conducted July 8-16, included tetanus vaccination for all women of childbearing age in a broader package of high-impact health interventions. It was the second such MNT drive in as many years, but additional resources strengthened the effort this time around.

“UNICEF has provided funding to support the campaign,” said Flint Zulu, the immunization officer in UNICEF’s Zambia country office, prior to the start of Child Health Week. “The funding will enable the five high-risk districts to intensify their social mobilization efforts.”

The program, which is supported by UNICEF, the Zambian Communication Services Trust, and the Department of Health, aims to increase the number of women who are vaccinated against tetanus, thereby reducing the number of newborns who die of tetanus.

In addition to tetanus vaccination, the program also focuses on improving the health of women and children through the provision of essential health services, including antenatal care, delivery care, and postnatal care.

Zambia’s “Child Health Week” has been successful in the past, and UNICEF is confident that this year’s initiative will be even more successful. The program is expected to reduce the number of newborns who die of tetanus by 50% in the five high-risk districts.

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For every child
Health, Education, Equality, Protection
ADVANCE HUMANITY
### A total of 34 countries initiated or expanded Supplemental Immunization Activities (SIAs), 1999-2004

- **MNT eliminated**
- **MNT not eliminated**
- **MNT provisionally eliminated**
- **Countries having initiated or expanded SIAs during 1999-2004**

Source: WMD/UNICEF MNT collected data, 2006

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In 1992 he joined UNICEF’s Bamako Initiative, launched three years earlier to reduce maternal and child mortality by making basic health services and medicines more accessible and affordable. His involvement in the Bamako Initiative, coupled with field work in Africa, led Rodriques to focus more on maternal and child health. In 1996 he joined UNICEF’s EAPRO, where he oversees the region’s numerous immunization programs, including MNT.

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**Total Funds Raised to Date:** $84.8 Million

(continued on next page)
mobilization efforts, create more outreach posts, and hire additional transport.”

Enhancing child survival

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Together with other basic health interventions, tetanus immunization has the potential to save the lives of thousands of Zambian women and their newborn children.

Enhancing child survival

Child Health Weeks also present an excellent opportunity to Immunize pregnant women against maternal tetanus.

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“The biggest eye-openers for them are that complications can be detected early and that they need to cut the cord with a new disposable razor blade,” said Maurice Hours, UNICEF Health Officer in Guinea.

For ten days, the women in the program are in the process of completing the second round of the necessary three rounds of tetanus immunization, reaching 88 percent of all women of childbearing age; 8 other districts are in the process of completing the second round. Meanwhile, plans are under way for next year’s coverage of the 14 remaining districts that will include training 420 midwives.

“Guinea is well on its way to ridding the country of MNT, and part of the credit goes to the TBAs and the midwives who train them,” said Hours. “Their involvement is indispensable, and by combining the training of TBAs with immunization, Guinea is making huge strides in protecting mothers and babies from this killer disease for years to come.”