

# BETTER DATA ON CHILD DEATHS COULD SAVE MORE LIVES

**Up-to-date information on the causes of child deaths is crucial in guiding global efforts to improve child survival.**

**A**lthough child mortality has been declining worldwide as a result of socioeconomic development and intervention programs, every year some 8.8 million children still die before their fifth birthday. A report with new estimates for 2008 (most recent data available) of the major causes of child deaths by region and by country will hopefully help to focus national programs and donor assistance.

Worldwide, the leading causes of death in children younger than five years are infectious diseases: chiefly pneumonia, diarrhea, and malaria. Some 41% of deaths occurred in the neonatal period, i.e. in infants less than four

weeks old. The greatest single causes in this age group were preterm birth complications, birth asphyxia, neonatal sepsis (generalized infections of the newborn), and pneumonia.

Diego G. Bassani, an epidemiologist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and one of the study's authors, explains that calculating the number and causes of child deaths is a huge challenge because in many developing countries, children die without having any contact with a health facility or health professional. For this latest study, however, the two largest countries, China and India, contributed real data collected through national surveys.

According to the 2008 estimates, some 49% of child deaths occurred in five countries: India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and China. Dr. Bassani sees this concentration of numbers as a huge window of opportunity. *"If you work with the governments of those countries, you can have a very large impact on the global numbers of child deaths."*

Dr. Bassani says the report can also improve the way aid is provided to countries and help direct national programs. He gives the example of India, where the government may face heavy lobbying from pharmaceutical companies, because even a cheap vaccine represents an enormous opportunity for profit once multiplied by the 27 million children born each year. *"Because of this, the government tends to be extremely careful about how it flags a disease as a priority. It wants to work with the best evidence possible."*

Michael Kramer, scientific director of the Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health, says the report shows a huge potential for saving lives. *"Many of these deaths are preventable, without a lot of high-tech interventions... Breastfeeding can prevent many cases of pneumonia and diarrhea; pneumonia can be treated with antibiotics; diarrhea can be treated with rehydration solutions; mosquito nets can reduce malaria risk."*

Preventing neonatal deaths is more difficult, because of the technical expertise and health infrastructure required (to resuscitate an asphyxiated baby or to perform a C-section, for example). Yet Dr. Kramer says there are promising avenues, such as a project in India where women are being given financial incentives to give birth in health centres.

Most of all, however, Dr. Kramer stresses the importance of improving data collection methods, perhaps through the use of intensive surveys in representative regions. He also points out that stillbirths are not included in the current numbers. *"Better counting is essential to get a handle on stillbirths and neonatal deaths and to understand how big the problem really is,"* he notes. 🦋

**BY EVE KRAKOW**



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