Message from Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
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on the Occasion of International Day of the Midwife

5 May is International Day of the Midwife. This year’s theme will continue to be The World Needs Midwives Now More than Ever. This overarching theme and the subtheme that ‘Midwives Save Lives’ is increasingly relevant as the 2015 deadline for realizing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) draws ever closer.

Every year approximately 350,000 women die while pregnant or giving birth, up to 2 million newborns die within the first 24 hours of life and there are 2.6 million stillbirths. The majority of these deaths could have been prevented. Universal access to a well-educated, regulated midwifery workforce in a functioning health system with adequate equipment and supplies and effective referral systems could prevent up to 60% of maternal deaths.

Globally there is critical shortage of competent midwives. This is due to many reasons including ineffective workforce planning and management, insufficient numbers of midwives being trained, poor quality of education and training, high turnover rate and loss of lives of midwives from HIV/AIDS. To ensure universal coverage for maternity care an estimated 350,000 extra midwives are needed globally.

In many countries of WHO’s South-East Asia Region, the number of midwives per 1000 live births is adequate. However, countries are facing critical issues with midwives related to ineffective workforce planning and deployment, poor education and training, weak health systems, poor working environment, limited opportunities for continuing education and career advancement, inadequate role recognition by the health-care sector and public, and gender inequality. These issues affect the competencies and motivation of midwives, their distribution to the areas needed, and the times that they can provide midwifery services, and more importantly prevent women from accessing quality midwifery services. These issues need to be urgently solved to ensure adequate, competent and motivated midwives who can contribute to the achievement of MDG 4 and 5.
WHO together with United Nations agencies, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) and partners works closely with Member States to strengthen midwifery. Ongoing work is, for example, development of a tool to assess health professionals education and development of core competencies for midwifery faculties. In addition, WHO promotes the deployment of public health or community midwives to serve women in grass root and hard to reach areas including home visits for pregnant and postpartum women and newborn babies.

In order to have competent and motivated midwives, governments are urged to: commit and invest in building stronger health systems for maternal and newborn health services with sufficient skilled birth attendants at the core, recognize the important role of midwives in saving lives; improve the deployment and development of midwives; strengthen quality of midwifery education and services; and enhance accessibility to midwifery services particular in rural and remote areas.

Increasing women’s access to quality midwifery services has become a focus of global efforts to realize the right of every women to the best possible health care during pregnancy and childbirth. WHO will continue to support countries to ensure the rights of women in accessing quality midwifery services.

**Midwives save lives of mothers and babies.**

Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director