The Global Maternal and Neonatal Sepsis Initiative: a call for collaboration and action by 2030

Significant progress has been made in reducing maternal and neonatal mortality in the past 15 years, but additional improvements will require a comprehensive approach that targets all causes of maternal and newborn mortality. Further reduction of maternal and newborn deaths is a priority for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and for implementing the UN Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health, and is also critical for two strategic plans—Every Newborn: An Action Plan to End Preventable Deaths (ENAP) and the Strategies toward Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality (EPMM).

As part of this comprehensive approach, it is impossible to neglect the importance of infection as an underlying and contributing cause of maternal and newborn mortality. Deaths due to infection occur mainly through sepsis—a potentially life-threatening condition caused by a dysregulated host response to infection and organ dysfunction. Infections cause about 11% of maternal deaths, and are also a significant contributor to many deaths attributed to other conditions. The risk of early neonatal sepsis increases in the event of maternal infection. Early neonatal sepsis causes about 8% of all neonatal deaths, but the proportion of late neonatal deaths due to sepsis is four times higher. Deaths from maternal and neonatal sepsis expose broader health determinants and underlying issues of quality of care including infrastructure constraints, inconsistent use of preventive measures, delayed diagnosis, and poor management of infection and its complications.

Considering the importance of effective prevention, identification, and management of maternal and neonatal sepsis in reducing maternal and newborn deaths, WHO and Jhpiego have launched the Global Maternal and Neonatal Sepsis Initiative. This initiative consists of a broad programme of work that will be delivered through a collaborative and innovative approach combining research, innovation, service delivery programming, and advocacy. Working at the global, national, and health-care facility levels, the Initiative will identify strategic opportunities to increase and strengthen the response to maternal and newborn sepsis. The panel summarises the Initiative’s vision, goals, priority areas of work, and objectives. The Initiative has received extensive support from the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, the International Confederation of Midwives, the International Pediatric Association, the Global Sepsis Alliance, and the Surviving Sepsis Campaign, in collaboration with the Society of Critical Care Medicine and the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine.

An early output of the Initiative is the new WHO definition of maternal sepsis, which reads as follows: “Maternal sepsis is a life-threatening condition defined as organ dysfunction resulting from infection during pregnancy, child-birth, post-abortion, or post-partum period.” The new maternal sepsis definition was developed on the basis of a review of existing definitions (including the 2016 Third International Consensus Definitions for Sepsis and Septic Shock) and through an international technical consultation. This process indicated that there are several definitions currently in use, which affects the identification of maternal sepsis.
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