

World Patient Day focuses on safe and respectful childbirth

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that globally 810 women die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, while 6,700 newborns die every day, amounting to 47% of all under-5-year-old deaths. Moreover, about two million babies are stillborn every year, with over 40% occurring during labour.



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This year's World Patient Safety Day focuses on safe and respectful childbirth.

In 2019 the World Health Assembly decided in to mark World Patient Safety Day annually on 17 September. The purpose is to create public awareness about the size and seriousness of harm caused by adverse events occurring during healthcare.

“Considering the significant burden of risks and harm women and newborns are exposed to due to unsafe care, compounded by the disruption of essential health services caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the campaign is even more important this year,” states the WHO.

Covid-19 vaccine protection

Awareness of vaccination in antenatal care has new significance this World Patient Safety Day as the Covid-19 vaccine offers significant protection against the virus for pregnant women and their unborn babies.

A recently updated circular from the Department of Health advises that pregnant women should be informed that they face a slightly higher risk of severe Covid-19 disease and should be offered the vaccine during any stage of pregnancy or breastfeeding.

“Previously, the immunisation awareness in antenatal classes, such as those provided by the experienced nurses at Netcare mother and baby wellness clinics, was primarily focused on the baby to reduce child mortality,” says Verena Bolton, national coordinator of Netcare Ncelisa human milk banks.

“Now it has also become important to also make parents aware that both mothers and babies are safer when the mother has been vaccinated against Covid-19,” she adds.

Obstetric haemorrhage

According to the South African National Blood Service (SANBS) severe loss of blood (obstetric haemorrhage) is a great concern and common occurrence during childbirth. Though not directly involved in the labour process, the SANBS’s role as a blood service is to ensure that emergency blood is there when it is needed.

“The latest report on Maternal and New-born Health (Stats SA) showed that in some rural areas in the country, the number of women dying during labour is still high, with one of the reasons being not getting blood on time,” says Marion Vermeulen, SANBS senior manager of Operations Testing.

This report triggered changes in the SANBS models, with one of the changes being the placement of emergency fridges to store O negative blood in maternal hospitals.

SANBS’s soon-to-be launched drone project is another innovative initiative which will be used to expedite the transportation of blood to rural areas, helping women who lose blood during childbirth as well as trauma patients, thus saving more lives.

Building unity

“In a world where millions of people each year suffer unintended harm – and sometimes death – in the course of healthcare, South Africa has a long road to travel in building healthcare management systems that reduce the risk to patients,” says Dr Sipiwe Mndaweni, CEO of the Office of Health Standards Compliance (OHSC).

The OHSC is charged, under the National Health Act, with ensuring that health establishments – from major hospitals to clinics and the practices of doctors and other health professionals – comply with legislated health standards. Mndaweni says the work of the OHSC would also impact positively on maternal and infant health.

“We believe that many of the standards that we strive to embed across health establishments would also strengthen the care provided to mothers and their babies. “The more unity we can build among those who care passionately about the quality of healthcare, the better our chances are of achieving the changes we need and that is what Patient Safety Day is all about.”

Objectives of World Patient Safety Day 2021

1. Raise global awareness on the issues of maternal and newborn safety, particularly during childbirth.
2. Engage multiple stakeholders and adopt effective and innovative strategies to improve maternal and newborn safety.
3. Call for urgent and sustainable actions by all stakeholders to scale up efforts, reach the unreached and ensure safe maternal and newborn care, particularly during childbirth.
4. Advocate the adoption of best practices at the point of care to prevent avoidable risks and harm to all women and newborns during childbirth.

To observe and celebrate the day the WHO has planned a combination of virtual and other activities. The signature mark of the global campaign is to light up iconic monuments, landmarks, and public places in the colour orange.

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