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SKILLED ATTENDANTS VITAL TO SAVING LIVES OF MOTHERS AND NEWBORNS

Geneva - The number of skilled attendants in developing countries needs to be increased by at least 333,000 if the international community is to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing maternal deaths by two thirds by 2015, according to a joint statement* issued today by the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Federation of Gynaecologists (FIGO) and the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM).

A skilled attendant is a health professional with the competencies for care during normal birth and the capacity to recognize, manage and refer complications in the woman and newborn. Skilled attendants play a pivotal role in reducing maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity, says the joint statement of WHO, ICM and FIGO. The statement calls for better monitoring and reporting on progress in achieving the MDG target of increasing the proportion of births attended by a skilled attendant to 90% by 2015.

The shortfall is most acute in the developing world. In developed countries and countries in transition, the average rate is above 90%. The lowest levels are in Eastern Africa (33.6%), South-Central Asia (37.5%) and Western Africa (39.6%), with much higher levels in South America (84.8%). Globally, only 61% of all childbirths are attended by a skilled birth attendant.

"Life-threatening complications occur in 15% of all births," says Joy Phumaphi, Assistant Director-General of Family and Community Health at WHO. "For a mother and her newborn, a skilled birth attendant can make the difference between life and death. Not only can they recognize and prevent medical crises on the spot, but they can refer women for life-saving care when complications arise."

The joint statement defines a skilled attendant, sets out what skills they should have, and the training and support they need. In their statement, WHO, ICM and FIGO jointly urge the international community, professional associations and donors to make skilled care for all pregnant women and their newborns a priority - focusing on increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, strengthening their capacity and increasing the resources available to them.

* *"Making Pregnancy Safer: the critical role of the skilled attendant"* can be downloaded at the following address: <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/MNBH/index.htm>

For further information, please contact Xu Baert, Communications Officer, Making Pregnancy Safer Department, Tel: +41 22 791 3436; mobile: +41 79 475 5562; email: baertx@who.int. All WHO News Releases, Fact Sheets and Features as well as other information on this subject can be obtained on the Internet on the WHO home page www.who.int.

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