

Birth defects

The Sixty-third World Health Assembly,

Having considered the report on birth defects;¹

Concerned by the high number of stillbirths and neonatal deaths occurring worldwide and by the large contribution of neonatal mortality to under-five mortality;

Recognizing the importance of birth defects as a cause of stillbirths and neonatal mortality;

Mindful that effective interventions to prevent birth defects including provision of appropriate community genetic services within the primary health care are available that can be integrated into maternal, reproductive and child health services as well as interventions to limit exposure to risk factors for birth defects;

Concerned by the inadequate coverage of maternal, newborn and child health interventions and the barriers to access to health services that still exist in countries with the highest burden of maternal, newborn and child deaths;

Aware that the attainment of Millennium Development Goal 4 (Reduce child mortality) will require accelerated progress in reducing neonatal mortality including prevention and management of birth defects;

Recognizing that the lack or inadequacy of vital registration systems in developing countries, and inaccurate records of the causes of death, are major barriers to estimating the size of public health problems attributable to birth defects;

Recalling resolution WHA58.31, in which the Health Assembly, calling for universal coverage of maternal, newborn and child health interventions, urged Member States to commit resources and to accelerate national action to build a seamless continuum of care for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health; and resolution WHA57.13 in which it was recognized that genomics has a significant contribution to make in the area of public health;

Recognizing that the prevalence of birth defects varies between communities, and that insufficient epidemiological data may hamper effective and equitable management;

¹ Document A63/10.

Recognizing the diversity of causes and determinants of congenital disorders, including preventable factors such as infections or nutritional factors, vaccine-preventable diseases, consumption of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, and exposure to chemical substances, notably pesticides;

Deeply concerned that birth defects are not still recognized as priorities in public health;

Concerned by the limited resources dedicated to prevention and management of birth defects before and after birth in particular in middle- and low-income countries,

1. URGES Member States:

(1) to raise awareness among all relevant stakeholders, including government officials, health professionals, civil society and the public, about the importance of birth defects as a cause of child morbidity and mortality;

(2) to set priorities, commit resources, and develop plans and activities for integrating effective interventions that include comprehensive guidance, information and awareness raising to prevent birth defects, and care for children with birth defects into existing maternal, reproductive and child health services and social welfare for all individuals and effective interventions to prevent tobacco and alcohol use during pregnancy;

(3) to promote the application of internationally recognized standards regulating the use of chemical substances in the air, water and soil;

(4) to increase coverage of effective prevention measures including vaccination against rubella, folic acid supplementation, programme addressing tobacco and alcohol use among pregnant women and women who are trying to conceive, health education programmes that include ethical, legal and social issues associated with birth defects for the general population and high-risk groups, and by fostering the development of parent-patient organizations and establishing appropriate community genetic services;

(5) to develop and strengthen registration and surveillance systems for birth defects within the framework of national health information systems in order to have accurate information available for taking decisions on prevention and control of these birth defects and to continue providing care and support to individuals affected by birth defects;

(6) to develop expertise and to build capacity on the prevention of birth defects and care of children with birth defects;

(7) to strengthen research and studies on etiology, diagnosis and prevention of major birth defects and to promote international cooperation in combating with them;

(8) to raise awareness among all relevant stakeholders, including government officials, health professionals, civil society and the public, about the importance of newborn screening programmes and their role in identifying infants born with congenital birth defects;

(9) to take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children and give priority to the child's well-being and support and facilitate families in their child-care and child-raising efforts;

(10) to raise awareness among all relevant stakeholders, including government officials, health professionals, civil society and the public, about the importance of newborn screening programmes and their role in identifying infants born with birth defects;

(11) to support families who have children with birth defects and associated disabilities, and ensure that appropriate habilitation and support is provided to children with disabilities;

2. REQUESTS the Director-General:

(1) to promote the collection of data on the global burden of mortality and morbidity due to birth defects, and to consider broadening the groups of congenital abnormalities included in the classification when the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (Tenth Revision) is revised;

(2) to continue to collaborate with the International Clearinghouse for Birth Defects Surveillance and Research in order to improve collection of data on global burden of mortality and morbidity due to birth defects;

(3) to support Member States in developing national plans for implementation of effective interventions to prevent and manage birth defects within their national maternal, newborn and child health plan, strengthening health systems and primary care, including improved coverage of vaccination against diseases such as measles and rubella, of addressing tobacco and alcohol use among pregnant women and women trying to conceive, and food fortification strategies, for the prevention of birth defects, and promoting equitable access to such services;

(4) to provide support to Member States in developing ethical and legal guidelines in relation to birth defects;

(5) to support Member States in the provision of appropriate community genetic services within the primary health-care system;

(6) to promote technical cooperation among Member States, nongovernmental organizations and other relevant bodies on prevention of birth defects;

(7) to support and facilitate research efforts on prevention and management of birth defects in order to improve the quality of life of those affected by such disorders;

(8) to report on progress in implementing this resolution to the Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly, through the Executive Board, in 2014.

Eighth plenary meeting, 21 May 2010
A63/VR/8

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