

Embargo: 0001 hours (EST) Monday, November 17, 2014

**World Prematurity Day
November 17, 2014**

A statement from the independent Expert Review Group on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health

Preterm birth is the leading cause of child mortality and urgent global action needs to be taken

Geneva, November 17—Preterm birth is the largest single cause of death among children under-5. And yet this largely preventable cause of childhood mortality is almost entirely ignored by the international community. This scandal of inaction must end.

On the occasion of World Prematurity Day, the independent Expert Review Group on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health is drawing attention to one of the most egregious failures in global health.

Among children under-5, preterm birth is the leading cause of child death. According to the latest data on child mortality, of 6.3 million childhood deaths in 2013, 965 000 were caused by preterm birth complications—15.4% of the total.

More than two in 5 deaths among children under-5 now take place in the first month of life. The highest proportion of preterm-birth-related deaths occurs in Southeast Asia (23%, or over 400 000 deaths), followed by the Americas (19%) and Europe (18%). Lethal preterm birth is certainly a huge crisis for low-income countries. But it also represents a substantial threat to child health in richer nations too.

Some countries suffer especially high burdens of child mortality from prematurity. In India, over half (56%) of all under-5 child deaths occur in the newborn period—an enormous 748 000 deaths of children in the first 28 days of life, over 320 000 of which are caused by preterm birth complications.

At least part of the reason for this failure to protect the lives of newborns, despite ample political attention given to child mortality, is that newborn survival was not made a measurable priority in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As the world approaches the end of the MDG era in 2015, it is essential that the increasing importance of newborns—and preterm birth mortality—is recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Part of the solution to the epidemic of newborn deaths from preterm birth is stronger health systems—universal health coverage—especially the provision of high-quality care by midwives. Every country should mark World Prematurity Day by ensuring that they have a plan to invest in the care of small and ill newborn babies. These plans should address the quality of newborn care as well as the obstacles to delivering such care. Countries should establish a mechanism to monitor and review the care of their newborns.

The health of newborns is also inextricably linked to the health of adolescent girls and mothers. Efforts to prevent prematurity and its harmful consequences must include addressing the social determinants of health for girls and women, as well as strengthening healthcare systems for mothers and their newborns.

In 2014, WHO and UNICEF launched an Every Newborn Action Plan that set out a comprehensive strategy to eliminate preventable newborn deaths. The iERG fully endorses this action plan and urges all those with responsibility for the health of newborn children to embrace and implement the recommendations contained within this plan.

Action by countries to save the lives of children born prematurely, some of the most vulnerable children in the societies today, is a measure of the commitment of that society to the future of its own people. World Prematurity Day is a moment for governments to recommit to a better future for their citizens.

Richard Horton (Co-Chair), Joy Phumaphi (Co-Chair), Carmen Barroso, Zulfiqar Bhutta, Kathleen Ferrier, Sejal Hathi, Dean Jamison, Tarek Meguid, Miriam Were.

The iERG was established in 2012 as the principal global review group to monitor progress on the recommendations from the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health. The iERG reports to the UN Secretary-General through the Director-General of WHO.