

Sexual and reproductive health spotlighted

Worldwide the burden of disability and premature death due to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) problems is enormous – and growing. Unsafe sex is the second most important cause of morbidity or untimely mortality among the world's poorest populations, and the ninth most important cause in developed countries.

Against this background the *Lancet* has initiated the publication of a series of papers showing a picture of declining financial support, increased political interference and an overall reluctance to tackle threats to SRH.

The survey of data from 59 countries shows that while sexual behaviours and norms vary enormously around the world, trends towards earlier sexual experience are less marked and less widespread than is sometimes supposed. However, the trend towards later marriage has led to an increase in the prevalence of premarital sex, which is resulting in high rates of unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortions and STIs among the young.

Given these results the call is made for a mix of prevention strategies and to caution against quick fixes and a 'one size fits all' approach. Greater efforts are required to tackle the links between sexual and reproductive ill-health and poverty, gender inequalities and negative social attitudes.

The series focuses on issues such as adopting a public health approach to sexual and reproductive behaviours to reduce death and disability from unsafe sex, the impact of unsafe abortions, and the need to prioritise SRH, family planning and contraception to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Source: www.thelancet.com

Cervical cancer vaccines for developing countries

The global health non-profit organisation PATH has launched a five-year project to develop expertise in the introduction in the developing world of new vaccines that protect against human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes most cervical cancer cases. A quarter of a million women, most of them from the world's poorest countries, die of cervical cancer each year.

With a \$27.8 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, PATH will conduct programme research in Uganda as well as in India, Peru and Vietnam in order to gather the evidence needed to make informed decisions on how to introduce the vaccine. PATH will assist in planning for and piloting introduction in the four countries, with the goal of informing regional and global vaccine introduction efforts and international financing plans.

The initiative will be undertaken in collaboration with international agencies, including the World Health Organization, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, Harvard University, the Catalan Institute of Oncology, and government officials in the four countries, as well as with industry partners Merck & Co. Inc. and GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals, which are expected to have approved vaccines available and will provide them to the demonstration projects.

The four countries were selected because, among other reasons, they have a commitment to projects aimed at preventing cervical cancer, and they have effective childhood vaccine programmes. Lessons learned from these countries may then be applied to countries with

similar cultural, economic, and health contexts.

Source: www.path.org

Obstetric fistula: Clinical management and programme development

Obstetric fistula, although still largely neglected in the developing world, has recently begun to gain international attention and there is a growing global momentum to reduce its incidence.

As part of these efforts, a new manual, *Obstetric Fistula - Guiding Principles for Clinical Management and Programme Development*, has been produced by the World Health Organization. This guide reviews obstetric fistula and the development of a national approach to its prevention and treatment, as well as the basic principles for caring for women undergoing obstetric fistula repair.

The publication forms part of an initiative being undertaken in partnership with UNFPA, the Campaign to End Fistula, Averting Maternal Death and Disability and the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, to scale up efforts and develop a prevention strategy to tackle fistula. This includes health promotion and family planning, access to skilled care during pregnancy and childbirth, provision of facilities for fistula repair, and training health care workers in the prevention, management and repair of fistula.

Obstetric fistula is believed to account for 8% of maternal deaths worldwide.

Source: www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/en/index.html