

Putting “Men” Back in “Women’s Health”


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Just as it does every year, this Father’s Day brought with it increased attention on the important and irreplaceable role that dads play in our lives: they are nurturers, teachers, providers, comforters, disciplinarians, moral guides and sources of inspiration. But in addition to the existing and emerging responsibilities that fathers have assumed, one role stands out as both underappreciated and under-encouraged: maternal health advocate.

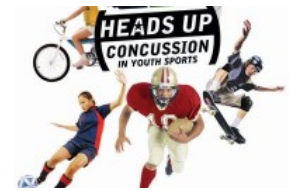
Women are often the health decision-makers in their family, taking care of the health-related needs of their children, their partners and themselves. While men have begun to play stepped up roles in the 21st century, there is still more they can do when it comes to their family’s health and wellbeing, particularly that of their female partner. As Jane Kato-Wallace, co-coordinator of the MenCare campaign, told me, “Engaging men in maternal and child health is key to ensuring that it is no longer entrenched as a ‘women’s only issue.’ As women’s participation in the workforce and in education continues to flourish, men must also take on their equal share of the caregiving, supporting their partners to ensure a healthy pregnancy and become emotionally connected to their children.”

This type of engagement is particularly crucial in the fight against maternal mortality. Among other urgent clinical, health system and behavioral factors, the lack of appropriate male involvement is contributing to unacceptably high rates of maternal death across the (developing) world. If we are to make real strides on this important global health issue, it is critical that fathers and husbands become champions of and active participants in women’s health before, during and after childbirth.

In a report published earlier this year by Compass: Women’s and Children’s Health Knowledge Hub with support from the Australian Agency for International Development, authors Jessica Davis, Stanley Luchters and Wendy Holmes reviewed 78 studies published

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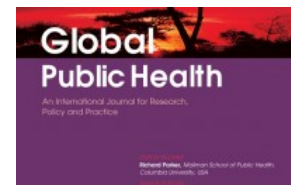
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between 2000 and 2012 to identify the potential benefits, harms, challenges and strategies for engaging men in maternal and newborn health in low-income settings. While their review came back inconclusive in areas like antenatal care attendance and facility-based delivery – and surfaced potential harms surrounding STI/HIV testing – it revealed a number of benefits that increased male involvement can generate:

Family Planning and Use of Contraceptives

Worldwide, approximately 222 million women who do not wish to become pregnant currently lack access to modern contraception methods. If there is one area in which male involvement could make a significant impact, it is likely family planning. As demonstrated by studies conducted in Malawi, Nigeria and El Salvador, the Compass authors note that “engaging men in efforts to increase the use of contraceptives in primary or long-term relationships can positively influence [health] outcomes.” However, there is still a need for additional research to determine whether male involvement has a positive impact on postpartum contraception use.

Maternal Workload During Pregnancy

In a previous blog post, I mentioned that women’s unpaid labor, such as household work, accounts for approximately one-third of the world’s GDP. To that end, the authors reviewed studies focused on maternal workload during pregnancy. They found that when husbands were aware of their pregnant wife’s health needs, they were more likely to assume additional responsibilities. Studies in India and Pakistan showed that men who knew about healthy pregnancy behaviors took on more household work and assisted their wives in seeking out health services.

Birth Preparedness and Intrapartum Care

While women can face fatal or near-fatal conditions during pregnancy, the majority of maternal deaths occur after complications during labor and delivery. This fact places added weight on the role of men in looking out for warning signs and responding to emergencies. As the Compass report highlights, randomized controlled trials in South Africa, Indonesia and Nepal showed that engaging expectant fathers during pregnancy – by encouraging antenatal care transportation and attendance, disseminating messages through mass media and promoting community education activities – led to “improvements in birth preparedness and assistance when complications arise during birth.”

Couple Communication and Emotional Support for Pregnant Women

In many parts of the world, husbands are the primary decision-makers when it comes to family size, often insisting upon having large families despite the potentially fatal effects it could have on the woman. She may not be physically or mentally ready to bear a child, her body may not have recovered from a previous pregnancy or she simply may not support having another child (for financial reasons, personal grounds or otherwise). For this reason, it is particularly encouraging to learn that greater male involvement can contribute to better couple communication before and after pregnancy. The report emphasizes important studies in Malawi and India that revealed improved communication on issues such as family size and contraception use, thereby creating more equitable relationships.

The above findings showcase a host of positive outcomes that are realized when men become more involved in maternal health, but now the onus falls on men themselves to step up their role. If men value the mother of their children and become active agents in supporting her health, we will undoubtedly see the number of maternal deaths continue to fall – and the number of endearing traits to attribute to men on Father’s Day continue to rise.





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