Study: AIDS Is Increasing Maternal Mortality in Africa

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Annual deaths of women from pregnancy and childbirth around the world have dropped significantly from about 526,300 in 1980 to 342,900 in 2008, according to a study in the medical journal *The Lancet* and reported by *The New York Times*.

However, the researchers also estimated that the number of pregnant women who died from AIDS-related complications in 2008 was about 60,000.

“To a large extent that’s why maternal mortality is rising in eastern and southern Africa,” said Christopher J. L. Murray, MD, the director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in Seattle and an author of the study. “If you want to tackle maternal mortality in those regions, you need to pay attention to the management of HIV in pregnant women. It’s not about emergency obstetrical care, but about access to antiretrovirals.”

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) agreed with the assessment. “Smart U.S. foreign policy investments must address HIV and maternal health with integrated and coordinated programming,” said Serra Sippel, president of CHANGE. “Currently, HIV, maternal health and family planning are funded, programmed and evaluated separately, which ultimately pits the issues against each other. Given the recent research results, this approach also limits program effectiveness.”

The study was conducted by researchers from the University of Washington and the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, and was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“There has been a perception of no progress [in decreasing maternal mortality],” Murray said. “Some of the policies and programs pursued may be having an effect.”

According to the article, the reasons for the drop in death rates include lower pregnancy rates in some countries; higher income in some countries, which improves access to health care and nutrition; more education for women in some countries; and more people with medical training in some countries to help during childbirth. Major improvements in India and China helped to decrease the overall death rates worldwide.

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