

Mothers and infants to get free health care in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone will abolish user fees for mothers and infants accessing the health system in a bid to reduce the country's staggering maternal and infant mortality rates. Wairagala Wakabi reports.

The introduction of free medical care for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, as well as children younger than 5 years, which is planned to start this month, could help Sierra Leone shed the unenviable reputation of having the highest maternal and child mortality rates in the world.

This policy will mean that almost 230 000 pregnant women and nearly 1 million infants will benefit from free health care this year. A government report shows that the cost of delivering this strategy during 2010 will be US\$91 million, of which \$71 million has already been committed by donors and the government.

President Ernest Koroma in February announced the abolition of all user fees for mothers, and children younger than 5 years, saying "we are determined to bring down the deplorable figures of deaths among pregnant women and children, and reverse the trend which is not good for the country's image".

The announcement was welcomed by WHO and non-government health agencies in the country. Laurence Saily, head of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Sierra Leone, told *The Lancet* that although it might

take some months to make the system work smoothly, "this decision to implement free care for the most vulnerable is a very important step to reduce infant and maternal mortality".

"We know that it will not be easy, but different committees are trying to anticipate problems and fill the gaps." One committee is addressing the need

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for qualified medical staff, including salaries and incentives to compensate for the loss of income linked with free care. Another is working on the supply of drugs and other logistics, while a third one is educating health workers and the public about the free care system.

The government report setting out the free care service says that Sierra Leone's health system is characterised by a lack of appropriately qualified health-care workers, insufficient supplies of drugs and equipment, poor coordination and management, and charges levied at points of service delivery. "It is therefore clear that urgent intervention is required in the health system to enable Sierra Leone to meet her MDG [Millennium Development Goals] targets in maternal and child mortality", says the policy report.

The high user fees are partly blamed for the low access to health services. A 2008 survey by MSF found that many people paid more than \$3.40 to receive treatment in the main health system, a cost that represented about 25 days of income.

Civil war between 1991 and 2002 destroyed health infrastructure in Sierra Leone, and has also been partly

blamed for the acute shortage of medical workers. Acting health minister Daudis Koroma said maternal and infant mortality were highest in the north where people were still very attached to traditional birth and delivery practices.

According to UNICEF, nearly 60% of women in Sierra Leone deliver without the assistance of a skilled health attendant. Deliveries are done by trained midwives in only 2% of community health centres, and only 5% of facilities have paediatricians. UNICEF reported last November that a third of infants in Sierra Leone did not receive routine immunisation, and that nearly 40% of children younger than 5 years are moderately or severely stunted.

WHO officials told *The Lancet* that the increase in prices for basic food with the rise in unemployment had led to a spike in the prevalence of acute severe malnutrition, and made it harder for more people to afford health care.

Last year, a report by MSF showed that patient fees acted as a major obstacle to accessing life-saving health care. "Lives that could be saved are lost every day. Necessary steps need to be taken now to improve the access to health care of the people in need in this desperately poor country", said the authors.

Pregnant women reported long delays in getting attention and some said that they were denied care because they could not pay. Some mothers said they had been kept in hospital until their family could settle the bill. Public hospitals were charging up to \$80–\$250 for caesarean sections, placing the procedure out of reach for most women in the country.

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Nearly 1 million infants are set to benefit from Sierra Leone's change in policy in 2010