The Role of Professional Health Associations in Reducing the Global Burden of Maternal Mortality

*Joint Statement by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC), the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)*

At the upcoming United Nations General Assembly, the world’s attention will be on defining an action plan to address the most pressing global development issues. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have shaped the priorities and objectives for global development efforts between 2000 and 2015, will soon reach their targeted deadline. Although progress has been made on many fronts, the MDG that has seen the least progress is goal #5 to improve maternal health. This lack of progress is a great concern, as still more than 280,000 women die every year due to complications in pregnancy and childbirth, but also because the health of a woman and a mother has profound effects on all the other MDGs as well, including poverty reduction, education, child health, and environmental sustainability.

This joint statement represents a declaration of commitment from three professional health associations whose main mandates are to improve women’s health and to ensure that every woman has access to the care she needs. Each of our Societies is involved with setting national standards and ensuring that women are provided with the highest quality of care. We have expanded our efforts internationally to contribute our skills and experience towards reducing the global burden of maternal mortality, bringing low-cost solutions, evidence-based research, and high quality education and training to the countries that need it the most.

The culmination of lessons learned among all three of our Societies has led us to draw the following conclusions and recommendations:

- **Maternal mortality is preventable.** The number of deaths due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth within our respective countries is greatly lower than in developing countries. This is evidence that preventing maternal death and reducing the global burden of maternal mortality is possible.
  - **Recommendation:** Scale up global efforts to improve maternal health in the countries that have seen the least progress to date.

- **Access to skilled attendance at birth is critical for preventing maternal mortality and morbidity.** Complications during childbirth, such as
hemorrhage and eclampsia, are not always predictable and require immediate emergency obstetric care delivered by a skilled birth attendant.

- **Recommendation:** Increase training of skilled health care workers, with emphasis on training in emergency obstetric care and enhance retention of trained health workers.

- **Sexual and reproductive rights are human rights.** The tragic consequences of poor maternal health are often a direct result of women being unable to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights; for example, restricted access to contraceptives or the inability to choose whether or not to have sex.
  - **Recommendation:** A human rights approach should be integrated within all sexual and reproductive health initiatives.

- **Professional health associations can play an important role in reducing the global burden of maternal mortality.** Health professionals and their associations are well placed to influence health policy, to set national standards of care, to support the development and dissemination of clinical practice guidelines, to implement quality improvement mechanisms such as maternal mortality audits, and to provide continuous medical education and training.
  - **Recommendation:** Encourage international partnerships between professional health associations to help build organizational capacity, transfer knowledge, and increase training opportunities.

Strong health systems are key to saving lives. By scaling up efforts based on the above recommendations, we can help to build the capacity and skills needed for each country to take a leadership role in providing quality care to women.

Our three Societies call on every nation, and every person, to endorse and support the Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health, proposed by United Nations General-Secretary Ban Ki-Moon, and to join us in a firm commitment to reduce the global burden of maternal mortality, so that every woman has the opportunity to choose when, if and how many children to bear, and to survive pregnancy and childbirth.

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**Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists**  
**THE AMERICAN CONGRESS OF OBSTETRICIANS AND GYNECOLOGISTS**