Infant and Maternal Hygiene: *Haiti and Peru*

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**Introduction**

There are many recommendations and practices to follow in order to guide an infant toward its optimal development. For instance, it is necessary that an infant receives adequate nutrition in order to ensure that the growth, health, and overall development of the child is at its full potential. While many different factors gear toward a healthy infant, it is absolutely imperative for a mother to maintain proper hygiene for herself and her infant. In developing countries like Haiti and Peru, the maternal and infant hygiene is not as optimal as it should be, thus, many negative results may occur.

**Background**

Maternal health and hygiene is the overall wellbeing of women during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period. It includes the family planning, preconception, prenatal, and postnatal care in order to reduce maternal morbidity and mortality (Caulfield, 1999).

A major factor that contributes to the lack of adequate hygiene is education; mothers without formal education do not maintain common household hygiene practices and as a result, cause detrimental effects to themselves and their infants. Poor maternal and infant hygiene is a significant issue in low income and developing countries. Worldwide, about 250,000-280,000 women die and about 6.5 million infants die under the age of five due to the lack of proper hygiene (Lassi, Salam, Das, & Bhutta, 2014).

Maternal health care and nutrition contribute significantly towards child survival. While maternal infections or unsanitary conditions result in a greater chance of neonatal death, most maternal and infant deaths are highly preventable.

**Methodology**

While many factors affect an infant’s likelihood of survival, the rates of death could decrease immensely with sufficient amount of education, preventative measures, and maintaining lifestyles that promote hygiene (Cleland & Ginneken, 1988). Maternal hygiene education has shown to have a strong impact on infant and child mortality in developing countries. On community, home, personal, and referral levels, maternal and infant hygiene in developing nations will improve.

Firstly, on a community and home level, it would be strongly beneficial for low income areas and developing countries, like Haiti and Peru, to receive knowledge and help from volunteers or health workers on how to maintain proper hygiene. These areas with high death rates due to lack of proper infant and maternal hygiene will slowly reduce the rate of death with interventions related to safe motherhood hygiene, nutrition, and prevention or treatments.

Secondly, through a personal outreach, health care providers, like doctors without borders, who volunteer in developing countries could create education services that are close to the mothers and their infants. This way, the population in need for a change will develop close relationships with the health care providers and more likely trust what they teach and retain the knowledge that they are taught.

Finally, on a referral level if there is a group needed for more intense care, the health care providers can refer them to another facility or clinic in order to be treated. Through the clinical interventions, patients will receive advice and knowledge on how to prevent bad hygiene. Furthermore, they will also get proper medications and supplies needed in order to maintain their hygiene.

**First Supporting Example**

Maternal and infant hygiene in most parts of Peru are not where they should be in order to increase survival rate and healthy lifestyles. In regards to sanitation and hygiene behaviors, the mothers in Peru are not educated enough to know that it can determine the health of their infants and themselves.

In some areas of Peru, mothers do not recognize the danger signs of diarrhea increasing or how to properly treat water for sanitary drinking. For instance, they do not know how to prevent diarrhea in their infants or how to properly eliminate feces. Sanitary disposal of feces is imperative in order to combat infant diarrhea, however, in most households in Peru, animal or human feces were deposited inside or near the house (Brown, 1989).

Moreover, research found that hand washing after defecation was very rare among both infants and mothers (SciELO, 1998). The hygienic disposal of feces is highly problematic in many communities in Peru. The World Health Organization encouraged the promotion of disposing feces in a hygienic and efficient way in order to improve sanitary water and improvement of health. It is essential to know the practices of proper feces disposal, yet surprisingly, very little is known in Peru.

Unfortunately, in many parts of Peru, sanitary water is pumped and available only about two times a week. Thus, creating a problem for disposing feces and the infants suffering high rates of diarrhea. Few individuals recognized that feces transmit disease, however, many individuals realized that feces are considered dirty because they attract flies.

**Second Supporting Example**

In Haitian populations, high rates of pregnant women are HIV positive, which result in a greater chance that the infants would be born premature, low birth weight, and malnourished (Halsey, 1985). Physicians researched death among Haitian infants born to HIV positive mothers and found that they were more likely to be ascribed to a diagnosis of AIDS (Toureau, 1990). A high percentage of infants born to infected mothers can also become infected in utero, during labor and deliver or even by breast feeding.

Maternal-infant transmission is the primary way an infant becomes ill or infected (Halsey, 1985). Therefore, the poor maternal hygiene will transfer over to the infant and cause detrimental results. Furthermore, the lack of overall maternal hygiene may cause many premature deaths among Haitian infants or the infants will be born with many health issues or develop diseases. For instance, in the photo below, a Haitian mother with her infant is shown without much of sanitation. Thus, the infant could develop diseases from the lack of hygiene in the environment or through direct contact with its mother.



There are several reasons as to why Haiti has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the Caribbean. For instance, many times there is a delay in seeking appropriate medical help when a hygienic concern or any other medical concern arises. There are also delays in actually reaching an appropriate facility that can provide the proper care they need. Finally, there may simply be no facility nearby of available to them, which results in poor hygiene and negative health results.

**Analysis**

Comparing infant and maternal hygiene in both Peru and Haiti, it is evident that both developing countries lack proper hygiene. While both countries have similar concerns, there are many specific aspects that need to be taken into consideration for each. For instance, both countries lack the proper education and knowledge needed in order to maintain good hygiene and how to take preventative measures.

Both countries also do not have the appropriate facilities or clinics to provide the mothers and their infants with the health care that they need in order to live an enriched and healthy lifestyle. Inadequate care at medical facilities, lack of physicians, and multiple delays to visit a health professional affected mothers in both Peru and Haiti.

In order to reduce the amount of deaths due to lack of proper hygiene among mothers and their infants in Peru and Haiti, there must also be a trust and understanding between the mothers and their health caretakers. If they trust the physicians and the care that they are providing, they will be more likely to visit the facilities and receive the necessary medications or education they need in order to prevent illnesses from the lack of hygiene.

The current data suggests that, in order to have the greatest impact on reducing maternal and infant deaths, improvements to maternity hygiene and health systems must focus on improving the quality and availability of care at existing medical facilities.

**Conclusion**

Overall, there are many suggestions on how to properly care for an infant in order for it to develop in a healthy way. Proper maternal and infant hygiene contributes immensely toward creating a healthy lifestyle for an infant. However, in developing countries like Peru and Haiti where there is very little education on hygiene and limited access to health facilities, it is not as easily accomplished. In conclusion, immediate action of providing proper hygiene for mothers and their infants must be taken in those developing countries in order to stop needless deaths.

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