



2010 HUMAN INTEREST STORY - PROGRESS

COTE D'IVOIRE

Sabra Seydou arrived at the Abobo Kennedy clinic in Abidjan with only a few minutes to spare before giving birth. This is her second visit to the Abobo Kennedy clinic in Abidjan since the beginning of her pregnancy. Extreme poverty has meant Sabra could not afford pre-natal tests or consultations. She was however able to have her first vaccination against tetanus, provided free by the Ivorian government. Her second vaccination, that which would provide immunity against the deadly bacteria for herself and her unborn child, was scheduled for next week.

"At birth, the child will not be protected," says Bernadette Kah, a midwife at the Abobo Kennedy Clinic in Abidjan. "So we will prescribe her a tetanus serum, which will protect her and the child. Then, the mother will also have another vaccination."

The lack of general hygiene at birth, with unsterilized instruments and unsanitary conditions make childbirth a risky affair. By becoming immune to tetanus, Sabra and her child will not become part of the national statistics.

In Ivory Coast, nearly 30 per cent of maternal and neonatal mortality is due to infection with Tetanus. Add this to other infectious diseases and lack of adequate health services, the national infant mortality rate reaches 89 out of 1000 live births, with maternal mortality at 810 in 100,000 live births.

Tetanus, a bacteria that thrives on dirt and rust, generally enters the body through cuts on the skin from infected sharp objects. However, particularly in childbirth, the disease can also be contracted through the use of traditional medicines used to clean the child's umbilical cord and the mother's torn perineum.

"When the mother and child return home, the grandmother and aunts will begin making traditional remedies," explains Dr. Mamadou Keita, district director of Eastern Abobo's Department of Health for the Government of Ivory Coast. "They will crush leaves and often mix them with charcoal or other ingredients, then apply them to the umbilical cord, as a way of cleaning the wound. This is definitely unsterile."

To address this serious killer of women and children, the Ivorian Government, with the support of UNICEF and other international partners, has held a three-phase vaccination campaign throughout the country. The campaign, offering free tetanus vaccinations to women of childbearing age (ages 15 to 49) aims to immunize over 5 million women.

Early rumors during the first two rounds of the campaign that the vaccine causes sterility or, contrarily, prolonged pregnancy have been put to rest.

"At first people were scared, until many women started to get pregnant after the first round of vaccinations," says studying midwife and vaccinator Awa Kone. "Then the word spread that it was fine, and now everyone is coming back for their follow up shots."

The 3-phase vaccination approach reaches into every neighborhood in the country. For a post-conflict country with a tropical climate, the logistics are impressive. Ange Niama, a logistician with the National Institute of Public Hygiene explains.

“Because this is a liquid vaccine, we first defrost the cold blocks, so that they don’t freeze the vaccine. Then we put the vaccines onto coolers, and keep the coolers in refrigerated trucks, where the temperature is kept between 2 and 8 degrees centigrade, and we take the vaccines to districts, then they distribute to the health centres and the sites.”

Routine immunizations for tetanus and other deadly and paralyzing diseases such as measles and polio continue throughout the year, as part of the Ivory Coast’s commitment to health and development.

“Ivory Coast is still one of the 39 countries in the world who has an elevated incidence of tetanus,” says UNICEF Country Representative Maarit Hirvonen. *“Will all the work being done on this 3-phase Tetanus campaign, we are hoping that the country will get its eradication certification by 2010.”*

For Sabra and her newborn baby boy, immunization is just against tetanus is the first step in a healthy life together.



Figure 1: Kari Doumbia came with her two children to the Houphouet-Boigny General Hospital in Abobo district of Abidjan for routine vaccination against tetanus for all pregnant women. Photo Credit: UNICEF Cote d’Ivoire/2010/Vigneault-Dubois



Figure 2: A vaccination post / Photo credit: UNICEF/ Côte d’Ivoire/2009/Bivigou