Caregivers in detecting common symptoms of ill health, taking children to health facilities and implementing such preventive measures as appropriate feeding and hygiene practices is critical. Integrated Management of Childhood Illness has been rigorously evaluated since its inception in the mid-1990s. Several agencies – including WHO, UNICEF, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – conducted multicountry evaluations in the early 2000s. In 2004 and 2005, UNICEF also reviewed the community and family component (C-IMCI). Although initial results were disappointing, mainly because of incomplete implementation of the three core IMCI components, later results have demonstrated some notable successes. According to studies, IMCI case management has enhanced the quality of health care delivered in first-level facilities, motivated health workers and managers, and improved health worker performance. And it has been implemented at costs equivalent to or lower than those of existing services.

Positive results for IMCI have been noted in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. A study conducted in rural districts of the United Republic of Tanzania, for example, found that those districts implementing a health system-strengthening initiative and IMCI demonstrated a 13 per cent greater reduction in child mortality than control districts.

Survey results in Malawi, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda indicated that wide-scale implementation of the C-IMCI strategy can result in significant improvement in some of the key family practices, such as steps to improve nutrition and early survival, disease prevention, home care or care-seeking for sick children, and provision of a supportive environment for child growth and development.

Successes such as these have led health policy experts to recommend the development of national policies based on country priorities, with clearly defined roles for IMCI and other child health interventions, and the need to critically analyse and address the system constraints.

During the 1990s, India experienced marked reduction in the under-five mortality and infant mortality rates. These trends were not been matched by declines in the rate of neonatal deaths. By 2000, neonatal deaths were around two thirds of all infant deaths in the country, and around 45 per cent of under-five deaths. Close to half of neonatal deaths occur in the first week of life. Many of these deaths could be averted if parents recognize warning signs, undertook appropriate feeding practices or had access to skilled health workers and facility-based care.

In 2000, the Government of India adapted the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) strategy to focus greater attention on neonatal care. The resulting approach, Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illnesses (IMNCI), modifies IMCI with specific actions taken to promote neonatal health and survival. Like IMCI, IMNCI supports three pillars for the effective delivery of essential services to neonates, infants and young children: strengthening health-system infrastructure, enhancing the skills of health workers and promoting community participation – all with additional emphasis on neonatal health and survival.

In practice, IMNCI consists of three home visits in the first 10 days after birth to promote best practices for the young child; a special provision at the village level for follow-up of infants with low birthweights; reinforcement of messages through meetings of women’s groups and establishing a linkage between the village and the home; and assessment of the child at local health facilities based on referral.

IMNCI is incorporated as part of the government’s Reproductive and Child Health II programme, an integrated approach to women’s health that aims to provide a continuum of care from birth until adulthood. The additional cost of adding the newborn component, mostly the home visits, is just US$0.10 per child.

See References, page 106.