



Maternal deaths 'fall worldwide'

By Helen Briggs
Health reporter, BBC News

Maternal deaths have fallen worldwide, from about half a million a year in 1980 to less than 350,000 in 2008, according to new data.

Countries such as China are making significant progress but there have been surprising increases in others, including the US, say researchers.

UK deaths are very low, but have not fallen in the past 20 years, the study, published in the Lancet, found.

Making childbirth safe for all women has long been an international goal.

But progress in some countries has been slow.

In the latest study, a team led by the University of Washington in Seattle, looked at data from thousands of observations of maternal deaths for 181 countries between 1980 and 2008.

"Two decades of concerted campaigning by those dedicated to maternal health is working"
Dr Richard Horton, Lancet Editor

They estimated there were 342,900 maternal deaths worldwide in 2008, down from 526,300 in 1980.

More than half of all maternal deaths were in only six countries in 2008 - India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

But some countries - including China, Egypt, Ecuador and Bolivia - had made significant progress towards achieving international goals on maternal mortality.

Lead author Dr Christopher Murray said: "There are still too many mothers dying worldwide, but now we have a greater reason for optimism than has generally been perceived."

He said finding out why a country such as Egypt has had "such enormous success in driving down the number of women dying from pregnancy-related causes could enable us to export that success to countries that have been lagging behind".

Mixed progress

The picture in high-income countries is less clear. One of the most surprising findings was an increase in the number of expectant mothers dying in the US, from 12 in every 100,000 live births in 1990, to 17 in 2008.

The authors say the trend can be explained in part by changes in the way maternal deaths are recorded in the US.



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Maternal Deaths Decline Sharply Across the Globe

By DENISE GRADY

For the first time in decades, researchers are reporting a significant drop worldwide in the number of women dying each year from pregnancy and childbirth, to about 342,900 in 2008 from 526,300 in 1980.

The findings, published in the medical journal *The Lancet*, challenge the prevailing view of maternal mortality as an intractable problem that has defied every effort to solve it.

"The overall message, for the first time in a generation, is one of persistent and welcome progress," the journal's editor, Dr. Richard Horton, wrote in a comment accompanying the article, [published online on Monday](#).

The study cited a number of reasons for the improvement: lower pregnancy rates in some countries; higher income, which improves nutrition and access to health care; more education for women; and the increasing availability of "skilled attendants" — people with some medical training — to help women give birth. Improvements in large countries like India and China helped to drive down the overall death rates.

But some advocates for women's health tried to pressure *The Lancet* into delaying publication of the new findings, fearing that good news would detract from the urgency of their cause, Dr. Horton said in a telephone interview.

"I think this is one of those instances when science and advocacy can conflict," he said.

Dr. Horton said the advocates, whom he declined to name, wanted the new information held and released only after certain meetings about maternal and child health had already taken place.