



Update – March 24, 2009

RELIGIOUS LEADERS SERVE AS MATERNAL HEALTH CHAMPIONS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The Fistula Care Project has encouraged religious leaders in Nigeria's Sokoto State to become "advocacy champions" for safe motherhood and obstetric fistula. Between October and December 2008, the religious leaders included information about birth preparedness and assisted delivery during their sermons, reaching a total of 4,250 people. The religious leaders lobbied some traditional birth attendants to refer cases of obstructed labor to the nearest health facility. They also encouraged their flocks not to stigmatize women with fistula.

At the same time, the religious leaders have worked closely with the families of women with fistula. They have counselled partners in strained relationships, citing injunctions from the holy books that advise tolerance, patience, and perseverance during hard times. The religious leaders have worked with community elders to convince some husbands to take back their previously divorced wives.

Many women with fistula experience divorce or separation, and the engagement of religious leaders as advocacy champions opens the door to reconciliation. The Fistula Care project is exploring how to document this important work with an eye toward replicating it in other Nigerian states.

TWO NIGERIAN SURGEONS TRAINED ON BOARD THE AFRICA MERCY

The Mercy Ships floating hospital, *the Africa Mercy*, is now moored in Cotonou, Benin. The Fistula Care Project arranged for two Nigerian surgeons to receive advanced fistula training on board the ship in February-March 2009. Dr. Sa'ad Idris (from Zamfara State) and Dr. Ileogben Sunday-Adeoye (from Ebonyi State) each spent two weeks on the ship with mentoring from Dr. Steven Arrowsmith. The two surgeons honed their skills in complex fistula repair surgery.

SOCIAL IMMERSION FACILITATES REINTEGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF FISTULA SURVIVORS IN GUINEA

The Fistula Care Project is working with the people of Kissidougou to initiate a reintegration program that begins in the Kissidougou Regional Hospital and continues



to the community. While healing from fistula surgery, women receive both physical and psychological therapy. After discharge, women live on a voluntary basis with local host families as part of a social immersion strategy. During the social immersion period host families are thanked by government officials and selected women provide sensitizations at baptism and wedding ceremonies. Women are trained in interpersonal communication skills to enable them to more effectively sensitize others when they return to their home communities.

Anecdotal reports indicate that fistula survivors who have participated in the social immersion program demonstrate improved confidence, self-esteem and emotional health. The reintegration approach has improved links between the fistula repair facility and the surrounding community. With empowerment from the social immersion program fistula survivors have actively advocated for those without a voice.

SOCIAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS IN BANGLADESH IMPROVE PREVENTION AND INCREASE THE USE OF FISTULA REPAIR SERVICES

The Fistula Care Project is using health workers in Bangladesh to educate communities in order to improve fistula prevention and to increase the use of fistula repair services. A campaign was launched to raise awareness about obstetric fistula and to enable hospitals to better serve their surrounding populations. Hospital staff from three hospitals were trained to raise awareness about fistula. They then worked with district- and sub-district-level health managers to sensitize rural medical practitioners, traditional birth attendants, government field staff, family welfare assistants, community leaders and family members of fistula patients. The meetings focused on the causes of maternal mortality and morbidity, gender issues related to maternal health, danger signs of pregnancy and childbirth, the importance of timely referral, and the problem of fistula and its causes.

The awareness-raising campaign promptly increased uptake of fistula repair services at the participating hospitals. Hospitals documented spikes in demand for fistula repair immediately following concentrations of awareness-raising meetings in communities. Nearly half of the fistula patients treated after the campaign heard that services were available from a health worker, while an additional 25% were referred by a former fistula patient. Demand for hospital delivery and C-section also increased following the awareness-raising campaign, such that one hospital is instituting community-level safe delivery units to meet the demand.