

Empowerment of Afghan Midwives

“Midwives on the Move: Empowering Midwives, Ensuring Healthy Women and Families” was the Congress theme for the Afghan Midwives Association (AMA) 5th Annual Congress, held on May 3-4, 2009. Pashtoon Azfar, AMA President, in her welcoming remarks used the theme to call attention to the key role of Afghan midwives in maternal and neonatal mortality reduction and recognizes that saving women’s lives protects and strengthens the health and well-being of their families.

The aim of the Annual Congress was to provide an opportunity to share midwifery experiences, best practices, and learn new approaches to care for mothers and newborns. The Congress also was an opportunity for AMA members to engage in networking and to develop supportive relationships as friends and colleagues.

More than 400 Midwives travelled from 28 provinces in Afghanistan to attend this event. The difficulties of travel and security caused some delayed arrivals, but there were no reports of any midwives giving up and turning back. The excitement about gathering together with other midwives and having an opportunity to attend educational sessions generated strong motivation and commitment. In addition, invited guests attended the opening and closing ceremonies and more than 50 physicians and other health workers attended the educational sessions.



Opening Ceremony of the AMA Annual Congress 2009. (Photo taken by N.Nayib)

The AMA Congress opening ceremony included words of support for midwives from Dr. Abdullah Fahim, General Director of Human Resources for the Ministry of Public Health, and representatives from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, United States Agency for International Development, and the American College of Nurse

Midwives. During the opening, the midwives heard the words of the former United Nations Secretary General,

“as we look back on the last decade one thing stands out above all else we have learnt that the challenges facing women are not problems without solutions. We have learnt what works and what doesn’t work...Study after study has taught us that there is no tool more effective than the empowerment of women and no other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce infant and maternal mortality” (Kofi Annan, as UN Secretary-General, opening session of the Commission on the Status of Women Marking Beijing + 10, 2005 <http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=1326>).

These words were a call for the midwives to be empowered and to be encouraged that the work they do builds empowerment for women in their communities.

A highlight of the AMA celebration was the introduction of the AMA Midwifery Song. Midwifery students, in beautiful outfits, sang the verses. The AMA Governing Body members then stood up, joined hands and enthusiastically sang the chorus. Invited guests made numerous comments about the emotional impact of listening to the song and watching the midwives from across the country, coming forward and adding their hands to the joined hands of the Governing Body members. The AMA midwives stood together in unity of purpose as they sang about their work of being with women. The lyrics stated that mothers will not be alone because all the time the midwives are with them, will take care of them, will recognize them and calm them.



Midwifery students leading the Midwifery Song. (Photo taken by N.Nayib)



AMA Governing Body and leaders join hands to sing the Midwifery Song. (Photo taken by N.Nayib)

During a plenary session of the congress, new research results about pre-service evaluation midwifery education in Afghanistan were presented. The 138 midwife participants in the study were all present at the session to hear how their contributions were included in the research recommendations for plans to strengthen the midwifery education with additional content. Other plenary sessions were focused on midwifery supported natural birth in Afghanistan, and AMA involvement in the family action group program to generate demand for health services. Concurrent sessions provided education sessions on clinical issues for midwifery practice. Topics included: newborn care; gender awareness; interpersonal communication and counseling skills (IPCC) and behavioral change communication (BCC); e-learning; community mobilization; manual vacuum aspiration; fistula prevention, counseling, and screening; professionalism; and demonstration project research results for prevention of postpartum hemorrhage (PPPH) with misoprostol and active management.

A Mothers Memorial Quilt competition contributed to the décor of the meeting hall and served as a constant reminder of the high maternal mortality rates in Afghanistan. Most of the provincial branches of AMA participated in the quilt competition. The criteria for making the quilts included: tell a real story of a mother who died because of pregnancy related complications, highlight the causes of maternal mortality in Afghanistan, and demonstrate handicraft skills. Five provinces won recognition for the best quilts: Kabul represented by Rabia Balkhi Hospital, Takhar, Badakshan, Herat, and Khost.



AMA Mothers Memorial Quilt Competition (Photo taken by N.Nayib)

Sustainability of the Afghan Midwives Association is a significant concern. The costs of basic operating costs, such as education and advocacy materials, travel costs, and phone communications are beyond the small amounts that Afghan midwives can collect through their membership dues. In typical midwifery style, AMA has begun small fundraising activities, including supporting women's groups to make handicrafts that can be sold for the benefit of AMA. Some of these products were available for purchase in the meeting hall. However, an AMA auction provided a center stage to exhibit the women's work, and excitement from the audience was evident as bidders won or lost in their efforts to purchase the high quality clothing or decorations.

The AMA Congress closing ceremony included a speech by Dr. Sayed Mohammad Amin Fatimi, the Minister of Public Health, as well as closing remarks by Denise Byrd, Chief of Party for Health Services Support Project (HSSP). The final Congress activity was the recognition and awards presentations to the Best Midwife of the Year: Sidiqa Hamidi from Takhar province; Best Clinical Midwife: Fawzia Hashimi) from Herat province; and Best Midwife Trainer: Mastora Rahman from Kabul.



Sidiqa Hamidi receiving the AMA Best Midwife of the Year Award from Dr. Fatimi, Minister of Public Health; Pashtoon Azfar, AMA President; and General Razia, Medical Directorate, Ministry of Defense (Photo taken by N.Nayib)

The AMA Governing Body demonstrated their increasing organizational capacity as they met in a pre-Congress meeting to finalize their management, planning and arrangements for this Annual Congress. AMA President, Pashtoon Azfar, provided leadership throughout the congress and recognized the essential technical and financial support of USAID-HSSP, as well as UNFPA and numerous non-governmental organizations who provided the funding to cover the travel costs that made it possible for the most of the midwives to attend.



AMA pre-Congress Governing Body Meeting (Photo taken by N.Nayib)

At the end of the Annual Congress, there was not a mad dash to depart. Many of the midwives stayed to talk to each other. Others gathered together to begin the work of packing up the materials used for the meetings. When it seemed that all was done, the Governing Body came together for one last opportunity to consider their plans for future work that could be built on what they had learned during the Congress. The Afghan Midwives Association can be proud of the hard work and commitment that their members and leaders demonstrated at the AMA Congress and their growing empowerment to contribute to the health of women, their newborns, and their families.

AMA Success Stories

Success stories are very important for many reasons.

1. To promote the positive image of AMA
2. To include in AMA organizational reports as part of evaluation of outcomes of AMA activities.
3. To share with partner/supporting agencies for their reports and to provide evidence for the value/worth of their support for AMA. (Encourages continued support)
4. To include in proposals when asking for donor support.
5. To increase the self-esteem and motivation of AMA members

There are many ways to document success stories.

I have identified several methods that we will start this year and then you can continue to collect and report your success stories for yourself.

First, we have developed an Activity Log that all AMA groups should use. Each group – local, regional and national levels – should have their own log.

EVERY time there is an AMA activity, it should be entered in the AMA Activity Log. This should definitely include all organized AMA activities, workshops, meetings, participation in collaborative activities with other agencies, but should also include every time one of your members represents AMA in some way. For example, if you ask one of your members to be part of a health committee in your area, list her appointment to that role/job on your AMA Activity Log. This is a success to have an AMA midwife voice as part of a health committee.

The second method we will begin at this year's Annual Congress and then you should do this at every Annual Congress. This is a way to collect large numbers of stories. Not every story will be a strong success story. But with 300 stories every year, you will have many that will be good success stories.

Each AMA member at the Annual Congress will answer to two questions. The answers should be written as a summary in one paragraph for each answer.

1. Tell a story about how being in AMA has made a difference in your personal or professional life.

2. Tell the story of your strongest memory of an AMA activity during the last 12 months.

When possible, we will ask that the answers be written in English – because these stories need to be shared with English speaking audiences. One way that we plan to share these stories is through the internet. There is something called a Blog. A Blog is like a diary or journal that is available for anyone else to read. Once a week, one of the stories collected at the Annual Congress will be added to the Blog. The Blog is also a way to do some fundraising. The Blog Internet service is completely free – no financial cost, but they do give you the option to let them put advertisements on the Blog internet page. It is possible for AMA to earn small amounts of money by showing these advertisements.

You need to select two or three AMA members to manage the Blog.

The work required will be:

1. Select and translate one story into English each week
2. Enter the story into the Blog once a week
3. Communicate with AMA President about any communication or account information from Google/BlogSpot

The criteria for selection include:

1. Kabul area
2. Able to write in English
3. Some computer and internet experience

The third method for collecting success stories is for each AMA leadership group at local, regional and national levels to answer the following question once a year:

What was the most successful AMA activity for your group during the last 12 months?

When did it happen?

What was the activity?

Who planned and organized the activity? (AMA and any partners?)

Who benefitted? (Include numbers when possible)

What did it cost AMA?

Were there any shared costs?

What happened? (Outcomes?)

We have created an AMA Activity Log that every AMA group should complete after every AMA activity. This will help with reporting and planning, and can also be used to help identify your success stories.

You should keep a copy for your group and you should send a copy of the Activity Log every year to the Governing Body before the Annual Congress. The AMA national office will keep these logs as records to help share AMA success stories.