

Malaria: a devastating toll on pregnant women and children

Malaria Consortium is working with DFID and the public sector to distribute long lasting insecticidal nets through ante-natal services

Belinda's short life did not get off to a good start. Her mother had malaria while pregnant with her, which probably contributed to Belinda's low birth weight of only two kilogrammes.

During her seven months of life, Belinda has had an uphill struggle to survive. She lies in her young mother's arms, looking frail. Her arms and legs are emaciated and her hair is thin and brownish.

"She has been sick for two months with diarrhoea, fevers and now she has malaria too," says her mother, Isaura Paulina, as she sits on the hospital bed rocking her baby.

Belinda's father is no longer with them "When Belinda fell sick, my husband abandoned me," explains her mother softly.

However, since Belinda was admitted to the rural health centre in Rapale district in the northern province of Nampula two days ago, she has improved slightly. She may still avoid being one of the victims of child mortality in Mozambique, where malaria accounts for over 42 percent of deaths in children under the age of five years¹.

Saving both born and unborn children

Twenty-year old Paulina is clinging to that hope, but there is fear in her large eyes. "I lost my first child to malaria when he was just one month older than Belinda," she says. "I also had two miscarriages before, each time I had malaria." Malaria during pregnancy can result in miscarriages and can cause life-threatening anaemia in the mother, contributing to the country's high maternal mortality rates.

Paulina's life might have been different if she had benefitted from the government's free distribution of long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLINs) to pregnant women through the public health service, supported by Malaria Consortium and other partners. The nets are a cost-effective way to prevent malaria, protecting those who sleep underneath as well as repelling or killing any mosquito affected by the insecticide.

Unfortunately Paulina did not attend the antenatal clinic in time. "I only went to the health centre when I was already sick with malaria," she concedes.



Paulina with her baby Belinda: hoping she will recover from malaria

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Isaura Paulina

¹ National survey on causes of mortality in Mozambique 2007-8 from the MDG Report for Mozambique 2010.

In the three provinces of Nampula, Cabo Delgado and Inhambane, Malaria Consortium is in partnership with the Provincial Health Authority to distribute over 400,000 LLINs through the public services with the support of UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

"More pregnant women are now coming in the first term of pregnancy for antenatal examinations, because they want a bed net," says Minakumary Pratasinh, the nurse in charge of the programme in the Rapale Health Centre. "Some pregnant women walk 50 kilometres to get to the health centre because they have heard about the net distribution. Before the net distribution it was difficult to entice pregnant women living far away to come to the health centre in their first term of pregnancy. Now when I visit the homes, I always find the nets there."

However, she adds that in a few cases some women have put the net away saying, "They are waiting to use it when the baby is born. We explain again that they must use it while pregnant as well."



Mothers wait at outside the antenatal clinic to receive free long-lasting insecticidal nets

Training public sector health workers

The educational component of the public sector net distribution programme has been central to its success. The Ministry of Health, Malaria Consortium and its partners provided a four-day training of trainers on how to prevent malaria in pregnant women in each district in Nampula. The training focused on the proper use of nets as well as prophylactic treatment for pregnant women. Participants then carried out training of their colleagues at their own health centres.

"The training was a success," says Vasoncelos Maio, Malaria Consortium programme officer in Nampula. "When we monitored the health centres, we found all the staff were able to explain clearly the importance of the nets and how to use them."

To help the health workers in their educational work with the mothers, Malaria Consortium has provided financial and technical support to the Ministry of Health to develop and produce serial albums with drawings and key messages. The free nets have resulted in 20 percent more pregnant women coming for check ups.

Paulina knows the importance of using the LLIN. "The net protects you and your children against malaria. I bought a net after my first child died of malaria, but after a few years, it became old and torn. I didn't have money to buy a new one," she says, not taking her eyes off Belinda.

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Nurse Minakumary Pratasinh,
Rapale Health Centre