

## **Broadband and maternal health**

More than half a million women die every year as a result of complications in pregnancy and childbirth, almost all of them in the developing world. The vast majority of these deaths could be prevented – yet, according to the World Health Organization, maternal health remains the MDG target for which progress has been most disappointing.

In Africa and South Asia, under half of all births are attended by a midwife or skilled health worker, and complications during pregnancy and childbirth remain the most frequent cause of death for women. Lack of access to health services is particularly acute for women in remote rural areas.

While evidently no substitute for increased resources, broadband services have already begun to demonstrate their potential to improve the health of women and their babies.

High-speed Internet enables health workers outside major centres to receive quality training and exchange experiences and information through video-conferencing, interactive discussion forums, and use of social networking sites. As part of a broader programme to connect health facilities around the country, Nigeria is linking 40 centres to provide midwives with live training via video-conferencing.

Broadband services can also give women easier access to information on family planning, hygiene and other reproductive health issues, including visual presentations that do not require literacy using local languages and culturally-appropriate content.

Broadband applications linked to ‘smart’ mobile phones are enabling health workers to create and access online patient records and to transmit health information to policymakers and researchers. Systems enabling local health workers to collect and enter health data via mobile phones are already in use in countries as varied as India, Peru and Rwanda.

And finally, in what has been called the ‘killer app’ for broadband, high-speed Internet permits the practice of telemedicine – specialist support, monitoring and diagnosis at a distance – that could transform health care in remote areas and help combat the scarcity of skilled health personnel. ITU is already helping establish telemedicine networks in, among others, Mozambique, Senegal, Uganda and Ukraine.

Pilot schemes operated by Swedish telecoms company Ericsson in Bangladesh and India have shown that, using new broadband technologies, existing mobile networks can be used to deliver broadband Internet health services to very poor people and communities. CEO Hans Vestberg, a Broadband Commissioner, is passionate about the power of broadband to transform the health sector, and is also a founding member of the Digital Health Initiative. In addition to its projects in Asia, Ericsson is providing broadband access, including health-related applications and telemedicine, to more than half a million people at the Millennium Village sites in 10 African countries.

Rwanda, which in 2009 spectacularly cut the annual maternal death toll from 2,875 to 224, is in no doubt about the health benefits of broadband. “Innovations in ICT and the country-wide roll-out of broadband services are allowing us to deliver better care to rural areas and train our health workers,” observes Rwanda’s Health Minister, Dr. Richard Sezibera.