Columns
Ministry



Sr. Ritamary Brown holds a clean birth kit at Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach. (Courtesy of Ritamary Brown)



by Ritamary Brown

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As a member of the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, whose ministry is the improvement of health care here and in our missions, I have dedicated my life to the care of the sick. Early in my time with the sisters, I learned that all life is precious. Because our hospitals provide maternal and child care, I have witnessed the dedication of our sisters and colleagues, their untiring efforts to preserve life in all its forms, and the grief that follows at the loss of a child.

Our late Holy Father Pope Francis said in 2017 "Every child born is the promise of a life that once again reveals itself to be stronger than death. Every love which springs up is a power for transformation which yearns for happiness."

Throughout my career in hospitals, I have witnessed numerous examples of the grief that only those who experience it can truly understand. Once I sat with my neighbor as she held her lifeless, beautiful child, who had died at birth. Later at a prayer service, I witnessed the mourning mother clutching a teddy bear as she entered the church. During my hospital administration internship, I was once called to the emergency room to comfort a young couple, who while passing through Louisville on vacation had experienced a miscarriage. They were shocked and grief-stricken. One Christmas morning when our hospital choir was caroling, we were asked to avoid the maternity floor because a mother had just lost her child.

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Two years ago, I retired from working in our hospital ministries and started volunteering at Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, a medical surplus recovery organization my community founded in 2002. Mission Outreach collects surplus, but usable, medical supplies and equipment from hospitals and clinics in the United States, then ships those items in 40-foot containers to hospitals and clinics in low-resource areas globally.

I was soon drawn especially to global health projects that focus on mother/baby clinical health care access. Supporting clinical care for labor and delivery through the donation of essential medical supplies and equipment is a focus at Mission Outreach and is meaningful to me personally and spiritually. Where a baby happens to be born should not determine his or her access to safe, clean conditions to come into the world. Every birth, every baby, is a miracle from God, and we should treat it as such.

Because I have witnessed the pain and grief of infant and child loss, I was shocked to learn about health disparities in many poorer areas of the world that result in infant and maternal mortality rates that are significantly higher than they are in the United States. Many of these deaths are correlated with inadequate pre- and post-partum clinical care access, including medical supplies and working diagnostic medical equipment.

Most of Mission Outreach's partner hospitals in low-resource communities report that reducing maternal and infant mortality rates is a primary goal for their facilities. They are desperate to develop basic labor and delivery services that include equipment necessary for mother and infant care.

Access to even one ultrasound during pregnancy, for example, can give doctors and nurses vital information about the health of the baby in the womb. Fetal monitors, particularly for complicated labor, can guide clinicians to make decisions about the best delivery method possible for a safe welcome to the world.

Clinical supplies for both mother and baby are also vital for safe labor and delivery. While Mission Outreach has always stocked supplies for labor and delivery, we learned of a need to provide comprehensive, complete resources for births — particularly those that happen in sparsely populated areas where hospitals or clinical care may not be available.

So, when an opportunity to help lead the clean birth kits program appeared, I took it.

Clean birth kits are used where medical facilities are not available or mothers may not be able to afford the cost of delivering at a hospital. We also know mothers in very poor areas may give birth in hospitals that do not have basic items, such as beds or supplies, and, therefore, may need to bring their own resources. Some births, especially in rural areas, occur outdoors or in places without safe, fresh water sources.

In these instances, births with short- and long-term complications can occur, and the possibility of infection or injury is high. The risk of losing the mother or the baby, or both, increases as well.

Clean birth kits contain items necessary to deliver a baby while preventing injury and/or infection due to improper instruments. Research shows that clean birth kits, when used in conjunction with midwives, traditional birth attendants and/or community health educators, reduce rates of infant and maternal mortality rates. Mission Outreach has identified a demand from international medical partners for 5,000 kits annually; we are starting with a goal of funding 3,000 kits the first year and intend to reach capacity by the program's second year.

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My personal mission in health care extends beyond our clean, well-run hospitals to places that do not have access to the same resources for clinical care that Americans take for granted. For this reason, I am grateful to participate in our effort to provide clean birth kits, resources that give women high-quality, basic supplies necessary to deliver a baby.

When we put the necessary resources in the hands of midwives and traditional birth attendants to give women high-quality, basic pre- and postnatal care, we can prevent injury and support the survival and thriving of infants no matter where they happen to be born. We can save lives and prevent the unimaginable loss of infant and maternal death.

Finally, as I reflect on the work of Mission Outreach and the Franciscan charism of the Hospital Sisters, I'm reminded of a tradition everyone at our organization values. Each time a shipment leaves our dock, we gather to say the "Container Blessing," knowing and believing that all life is precious and that we are blessed to support it.

I would like to conclude with that prayer and ask you to pray for all the people — especially mothers and babies — around the world whose lives can be saved by the sharing of medical resources.

God of Compassion, be with us today.

Open our minds and hearts to your will.

Provide us wisdom to understand the needs of Your people;
motivate us to take the appropriate actions;
and give us the courage to face the challenges that taking action will create.

Help us to love and embrace those who are poor and vulnerable;
challenge us to live simply and be better stewards of Your creation.

Empower us to be bearers of peace and justice in our world.

We pray, in Jesus' name,

Amen