

Childbirth experience matters to women and their families

From 10 to 16 February 2021, the Department of Health celebrated Pregnancy Awareness Week.

While women may feel apprehensive and vulnerable during pregnancy, they are also looking forward to the birth of their babies. They and their communities anticipate a worry-free delivery, dependent on respectful and quality-driven maternity care from their health centres and hospitals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused additional anxiety in the already emotional experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Women are more reliant than ever on midwives and doctors to assist them during labour.

Understandably, cases of mistreatment or sub-standard care will quickly appear on social media and news outlets, resulting in public condemnation of health workers for inadequate care. Women should experience a positive birthing experience, even when the health system is stressed and under-resourced.

Most health care providers are compassionate and caring. They want to excel at their profession and provide quality obstetric care, avoiding the tragedies of stillbirths and newborn deaths.

A programme to improve respectful care during childbirth is being implemented in district hospitals and midwife obstetric units in community health centres. Known as CLEVER Maternity Care, it strengthens the health system and clinical governance by focusing on teamwork and improving the knowledge and skills of health professionals. Champions in each unit model respectful quality birthing care to the rest of the team and encourage midwives and doctors to do their best every working day.

CLEVER is an acronym for **C**linical care, **L**abour ward organisation, **E**limination of care barriers, **V**erification and measurements to improve care, **E**mergency obstetric care drills, and **R**espectful care.

Improvement in clinical practices depends on strengthening the basic infrastructure of each health facility. The environment must be clean and cared for; essential equipment must be available and maintained; vital medicines and other supplies should be at hand and replenished on time.

The CLEVER programme provides weekly support sessions for managers, midwife teams, doctors and other staff to assist them in creating a safe clinical environment. Session leaders encourage behavioural change, reinforce collaboration and teamwork, and build clinical capacity. Each session starts with a bedside hand-over round during the change of shift between day and night staff. The rest of the session comprises mentoring and coaching around respectful and safe childbirth. A simulated drill helps improve skills in emergency deliveries. Finally, the team discusses guidelines and training materials selected for that week.

How does CLEVER Maternity Care help? At the core is repetition of activities until new care habits become automatic. Health workers experience the satisfaction of observing improvements in the quality of care that they deliver.

The process of behavioural change begins with self-awareness and team behaviour. Insights from occupational safety guide interventions for improving staff's levels of competence and respectful care. "Pointing-and-calling" is one method for reducing negligence and human error by improving the coordination between each person's mind and hands. It instils precise actions and focuses concentration on complex tasks.

Daily celebration of small gains and simple rules reinforces habits and skills. For example, the 'NO shouting!' rule reminds the team to be respectful and caring, even under stress. Team members are also encouraged to offer assistance and support to colleagues struggling

with a difficult birth or an anxious client. Small acts of kindness can make the difference on a bad day.

Tshwane District has implemented CLEVER Maternity Care, resulting in an overall improvement in women's satisfaction with their childbirth experience. They appreciated having a voice. The skills and knowledge of the birth attendants improved and there was a reduction in stillbirths and neonatal deaths. Respectful care, appropriate communication and improvement in maternity services made the difference.

Since the introduction of CLEVER, the COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmed our health system. The physical and mental health of maternity health workers is now essential if we are to sustain the gains made through CLEVER Maternity Care. District health management and staff are working to improve matters, one step at a time, despite the adverse circumstances.

About CLEVER:

Development of CLEVER Maternity Care began during 2017. [Find out more](#) at the University of Pretoria's Research Centre for Maternal, Fetal, Newborn and Child Health Care Strategies and Maternal and Infant Health Care Strategies Unit, South African Research Council (SA MRC). MSD Global Fund for Mothers provided funding for implementation.

URL: <https://www.up.ac.za/centre-for-maternal-fetal-newborn-and-child-healthcare>