



AUGUST 2014

Myanmar Family Planning Best Practices Conference



Dr. Theingi Myint facilitates a township discussion group. PHOTO: Nichole Zlatunich

On June 30, 2014, more than 160 guests from Myanmar and around the world gathered at the Mingalar Thiri Hotel in the capital city of Naypyitaw to discuss best practices in family planning.

Hosted by Myanmar's Ministry of Health, with support from international and local partners, the three-day Family Planning Best Practices Conference was a groundbreaking event that provided township representatives an opportunity to share experiences and develop localized action plans around family planning and related reproductive health services. The conference was made possible thanks to anchor funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The conference followed Myanmar's November 2013 commitment to FP2020, with a goal of increasing Myanmar's contraceptive prevalence rate to above 60 percent.¹ The first day of the conference welcomed comments from Myanmar's Minister of Health, Dr. Pe Thet Khin, and a presentation by Dr. Theingi Myint of Myanmar's Department of Health. Dr. Theingi Myint's presentation focused on the new five-year national reproductive health strategy, which launched subsequently on July 10, 2014.

"This conference is part of our efforts to acknowledge the importance of family planning in improving the health of the nation. Together we will identify bottlenecks and challenges we are facing, and develop innovative solutions and plans for actions for the future."—Dr. Pe Thet Kin, Opening Remarks

1. See Myanmar's policy and political, financial, and program and service delivery commitments to FP2020 at <http://www.familyplanning2020.org/reaching-the-goal/commitments/all-commitments/commitment/40>

THREE DAYS OF DIALOGUE

On the first day, attendees took part in discussions with international experts on effective practices in family planning to learn from global experiences. Representatives from several organizations and institutions were present: the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Bill & Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Stanford Program for International Reproductive Education and Services (SPIRES), the National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN) of the Government of Indonesia, and FP2020. These representatives actively led discussions that called on recent research and program implementation experience. Laputta township and Kayin State officials also shared their experiences of delivering contraceptive services, with innovations to overcome challenges.

On the second and third days, the 10 attending township teams identified bottlenecks in providing family planning services, and collaborated with state and national health officials in developing action plans for overcoming these obstacles. Township teams consisted of township medical officers, OB/GYN physicians, nurses, and midwives, as well as NGO partners. Through this hands-on experience, they developed tangible implementation plans, incorporating lessons from the best practices presentations, expertise from technical experts, and knowledge from their own Myanmar peers.

Recommendations

Participants from 10 townships, in partnership with international and national experts, provided the following insights and recommendations for supporting the government of Myanmar to improve current policies and technical guidelines around reproductive health and family planning:

Data for Public Health

Historically, insufficient data have been a challenge for public health programs in Myanmar. In 2014, the country held its first national census in over 30 years and, in 2015, Myanmar is expected to conduct its first Demographic and Health Survey. At the conference, several township teams discussed strategies for providing a clearer picture of the number of eligible couples currently accessing family planning and reproductive health services, as well as better defining the country's current unmet need. One such strategy is to incorporate data from family planning and reproductive health service delivery provided by the private sector and international NGOs into national health and logistics management information systems. Furthermore, teams identified a priority at the township level—the training of basic health staff in data collection and commodity supply logistics management.

Focus on Young People

As for programmatic recommendations, townships and experts agreed that programs need to strengthen the focus on marginalized young people. Recommended activities included (1) developing youth-friendly service delivery guidelines for both public and private sector providers; (2) launching a hotline for young people to access information; (3) training additional peer educators at the community level; and (4) making more educational materials locally available.



Above: Dr. Hnin Hnin Lwin of the Department of Health signs the FP2020 banner. PHOTO: U Thaw Zin. Below: Dr. Paul Blumenthal of SPIRES provides technical inputs into the discussion. PHOTO: Sono Aibe



Township Medical Officer Dr Soe Soe Naing from Pyaw Bwe Township makes a point. PHOTO: Nichole Zlatunich

Ensuring Equitable Access

Teams discussed additional obstacles faced by communities in attaining reproductive health, and made recommendations for addressing inequitable access to services. For example, language constitutes a common barrier for ethnic minorities, and local dialects should be considered in all communications materials. To bring services closer to the rural villages that desperately need reproductive health services, auxiliary midwives (AMW) could play a greater role in contraceptive information and service delivery in the future. The teams called for task-sharing, including training of AMW to enable them to provide comprehensive counseling on all methods, dispense pills and condoms, administer injectable contraceptives, and provide referrals for long-acting methods.

Strengthening Providers' Skills to Offer a Full Range of Methods

To ensure clients receive the highest quality contraceptive information and services, township teams identified counseling skills as a priority for training service providers. This is especially important as couples in Myanmar learn about newly introduced long-acting and reversible contraception, such as implants. Users should know about possible side effects to minimize dissatisfaction and discontinuation.

As for intrauterine devices (IUDs), the township teams joined national OB/GYNs in the audience to discuss the importance of training midwives in both IUD insertion and removal. One cadre of providers—private sector general practitioners—has not been consistently involved in contraceptive service delivery, especially IUD insertion. These practitioners, if properly trained and incorporated into the health system, could be a valuable additional source of service delivery for contraception and other related sexual and reproductive health services.

Teams also recommended that technical guidelines be updated for all available methods of contraception based on global guidelines and best practices. They called for the development of appropriate training materials, translated into local languages; updating pre-service training curricula for health professionals; and further clarification of existing policies.

Promoting Contraceptive Security

As family planning information attracts more users, a continuous supply of contraceptive commodities is crucial. Teams recommended that Myanmar rapidly improve its commodity forecasting capacity—including the private sector in joint procurement planning—and set up a contraceptive security task force to ensure emergency support can be mobilized when a national stockout is anticipated.

In summary, there was an urgent request from townships for an increase in the government budget for contraceptives, increased human resources, and reliable transportation to rural areas, both to reach clients and to provide routine supervisory visits. Funding for community sensitization and mobilization was also identified as an ongoing need.



Frontline workers report back on the group discussions about bottlenecks PHOTO: Nichole Zlatunich



Participants of the FP Best Practices Conference gather together on June 30, 2014. PHOTO: U Thaw Zin

Next Steps

As Myanmar increases its support for the advancement of women and children's health, the country's future progress in the public health sector becomes increasingly promising. The Myanmar Family Planning Best Practices Conference launched a new level of open and productive conversations among international and national participants, and paved the way for Myanmar's anticipated rapid advances in family planning.

The Ministry of Health has made a commitment to establish a working group specifically focused on FP2020. The group's goal is to ensure coordination among NGO and government partners in meeting Myanmar's pledge to align with the five-year national reproductive health strategic plan. The joint efforts of public and private sector providers to bring new supplies of contraceptives, combined with the continued support of global and local technical experts, inspire hope—that the unmet need of millions of Myanmar women and men will be fulfilled in the next five years.

Partnerships for a Brighter Future in Myanmar

Contributing partners that supported the Ministry of Health to make this conference a success included Pathfinder International with financial support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the 3MDG Fund, FP2020/UN Foundation, UNFPA, and WHO. Technical partners included the Bill & Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health, BKKBN of Indonesia, the Futures Group, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, Myanmar Partners for Policy and Research, Marie Stopes International, and Population Services International. Merlin/Save the Children; Myanmar Medical Association, including OB/GYN and GP Societies; Myanmar Nurses and Midwives Association; and Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation were also involved in conference planning and agenda-setting.

"We would like to work actively with state and township health personnel, not just for these three days, but beyond—through follow-up activities to improve national public sector service delivery capacity for birth spacing and reproductive health in Myanmar."

—Sono Aibe, Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at Pathfinder International and a presenter at the conference

COVER: Participants listen closely to technical presentations on the first day of the conference.

PHOTO: U Thaw Zin

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