

## Saving children at risk of infection

Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV/AIDS is responsible for 90% of infections among children under the age of 15. Response to HIV/AIDS has strengthened around the world, with many countries even providing free ARV medication. However, most MTCT programmes fail to achieve their full impact due to limited resources and the complexities involved.

The Order of Malta, through its Geneva-based relief organisation Fondation CIOMAL, has recently stepped up its efforts in Latin America to protect children at risk of contracting HIV within the context of broader mother-child support programmes.

### MTCT can be prevented

HIV/AIDS is well entrenched in Latin America, with about two million adults and children living with the virus. In 2004, an estimated 95,000 people died, the highest regional statistic after sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. UNAIDS reports that about 50,000 children in the region are currently at risk of HIV infection through MTCT.

MTCT can be eliminated by ARV treatment, safe delivery practices and avoidance of breastfeeding. In the developing world, however, most HIV-positive women live in deprived conditions, often lacking access to clean water, sanitation and medical care. For these women, ARV treatment is unavailable or unaffordable, elective caesarean is seldom possible or safe, and refraining from breastfeeding is not an option.

### Effective and sustainable interventions

Since their launch in Mexico (2000) and Argentina (2002), the Order of Malta's MTCT prevention programmes seek to make effective and sustainable interventions available to HIV-positive women and their children. The building blocks of this initiative go well beyond the basic provision of ARV medicines. The interventions are fully integrated within a comprehensive mother-child assistance package, which includes voluntary counselling and testing, general healthcare, psychological support, monitoring and the provision of breastmilk substitutes.

### MTCT prevention in Mexico: a holistic approach

Mexico ranks 13th globally and third in the Americas in the number of HIV cases reported. More than 1,000 infants in the country are believed to become infected each year.

The Order of Malta's MTCT prevention programme in Mexico (called *Salva a un Niño del SIDA* or *Save A Child from AIDS*) involves a number of local organisations. While CIOMAL is the initiator and major financial sponsor of the programme, the Order's Mexican Association (*Asociación Mexicana de Malta* or AMM) acts as its day-to-day manager. AMM coordinates all activities with the participating hospitals and other local partners, and monitors the progress of each woman enrolled. This involves constant communication with each of the participants, as well as ongoing, regular dialogue with the expectant mother.

Expectant mothers enrol at each of the four participating hospitals in Mexico City and elsewhere in the country. A hospital social worker determines the expectant mother's financial situation and whether she is eligible for enrolment. Once registered, she immediately begins receiving treatment. AMM makes a personal visit to her home to determine her particular circumstances, explain the programme in more detail, and provide ongoing counselling.



Fondation CIOMAL  
(Comité International de l'Ordre de Malte)

As an international organisation of the Order of Malta, Fondation CIOMAL is actively involved in the fight against leprosy, and more recently, the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV/AIDS. Its MTCT prevention programmes seek to make feasible and sustainable interventions available to HIV-positive women in developing countries, while ensuring that these interventions are fully integrated in broader mother-child assistance programmes. This includes general healthcare, voluntary testing, counselling, and the provision of breastmilk substitutes.

[www.ciomal.ch](http://www.ciomal.ch)

AMM covers the costs of medical care and treatments, counselling, travel assistance, and in some instances, job training and financial support. The programme also provides infant formula for up to 24 months after birth. When leaving the hospital, a gift basket is provided that includes assorted baby supplies and personal hygiene products. During the first two years following the birth, AMM also provides a monthly basic food basket containing products such as rice, beans, milk, flour and sugar. The baskets are delivered directly to the home, providing an opportunity for AMM to monitor progress.

### Encouraging results so far

The Mexican programme was launched in 2000 in cooperation with the Instituto Nacional de Perinatología in Mexico City, and a number of local agencies. Since the start, 120 HIV-positive women and their babies have or are being cared for; 40 mothers are currently enrolled. So far, all but one woman (who died during pregnancy) have delivered healthy babies.

In Argentina, the MTCT prevention programme started in 2002 in cooperation with the Argentine Directorate of Public Health and eight hospitals in Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area. The Directorate of Public Health funds most of the programme's costs, which has made it possible to treat over 500 HIV-positive women. The programme has had a 95% success rate so far, the balance being mainly the result of treatment not being followed up properly by the mothers.

### Expanding the programme

The Order of Malta intends to expand its MTCT prevention programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean initially. Selected African and Asian countries will be considered at a later stage. Partnerships with local and international agencies and organisations are being explored in order to maximise technical and financial resources, including professional staff to manage the programmes on a larger scale across several countries.