November 17th, 2016 was World Prematurity Day and newborn care champions in Ghana stood up and out for newborn babies. Several hospitals put together weeklong activities to mark the day. The main message was, “Born too soon/early – help me survive.”
Prematurity – a leading cause of newborn death

Prematurity and low birth weight together are one of the three leading causes of newborn death, accounting for 27% of newborn deaths (Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2008). The Making Every Baby Count Initiative (MEBCI), implemented by PATH in collaboration with Ghana Health Service and with funding from Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) of the United Kingdom, has taken this cause of newborn death very seriously. In this project, over 1,000 health care providers in Brong Ahafo, Eastern, Volta and Ashanti Regions have been trained between 2014 and 2016 to provide care that helps preterm newborns to survive and thrive. Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) is a key intervention that helps preterm newborns to survive outside an incubator. The skin-to-skin component of KMC has been encouraged in health facilities where newborn babies – preterm and full term – are placed on the mother’s chest in between her breasts to receive warmth. Skin-to-skin care is also practiced by fathers, and it has proved to be very effective in keeping the newborn baby warm. This is important because low body temperatures are fatal to newborn babies.

On the occasion of World Prematurity Day, parents are reminded that:

- A preterm baby can live if given the required attention, warmth and medication;
- Delivering a baby in the health facility is the safest option for any baby, especially for the preterm baby who needs special attention;
- Skin-to-skin contact of the mother and baby for as many hours a day as possible is effective for keeping the baby alive, warm and well, and fathers can also provide skin-to-skin care to newborn babies;

How can you support a preterm baby to survive?

Contact a health facility near you and support the creation of a KMC corner. Such a corner would be useful to women who have given birth to preterm and low birth weight babies; they can perform KMC activities in these corners and support each other to care for the preterm babies.

...... And newborn champions wore purple to stand for preterm care

The purple ribbon has been adopted as a symbol for prematurity. To mark World Prematurity Day, newborn champions wore purple on various days of the week. Cars were also decorated with the purple ribbon and the color purple was used to write messages on placards which health workers and champions paraded on the streets. Below are some champions in the Brong Ahafo Region in purple, including Dr. Jacqueline Asibey (Pediatrician at Holy Family Hospital, Techiman), Mrs. Benson Bennet (Manager of Storm FM, Sunyani) and Dr. Adoma Fokuo (Pediatrician at Dormaa East District Hospital, Dormaa).

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1 In 2015, neonatal mortality in Ghana was measured at 28 per 1,000 live births (http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ghana/mortality-rate-neonatal-per-1-000-live-births-wb-data.html; http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.NMRT)
Public education on prematurity

Several facility-based and community-based newborn care champions undertook public education about prematurity to commemorate World Prematurity Day. Some champions went to the market and interacted with market women and buyers about skin-to-skin care of premature babies. Some interacted with women at antenatal clinic, and others used radio to educate the public. The key messages were the need to maintain skin-to-skin contact of mother with the baby, refraining from bathing the fragile newborn especially with cold water, feeding the newborn only on breastmilk, expressing the milk and feeding the baby with a cup if the baby is unable to suck, and keeping the baby’s head warm with a cap at all times. Parents were encouraged to report at the health facility if the newborn is not feeding well, shivers, convulses, changes in color (becomes too dark or appears to have yellowing skin), or develops a sore or rash. The public was encouraged to work closely with health workers for the safety of all newborn babies, and refrain from giving non-prescribed medications and concoctions to the newborn at home.

The message was well appreciated, with mothers pledging to continue educating women in their communities and homes about skin-to-skin care and other ways to support all newborns, especially preterm babies and those of low birth weight.
In Kumasi, newborn care champions joined the Pediatric Society of Ghana to launch the “One Baby One Cot Manifesto”. This campaign was intended to draw the attention of the Government, various duty bearers, philanthropists and the general public to the situation in the Mother Baby Unit (MBU) of the Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital (KATH), where five to seven babies sometimes share a cot. There is very little space in the MBU, making placement of more cots impossible. The manifesto proposed expansion of the MBU to make more room, followed by procurement of more cots for every baby to have a cot to him or herself. According to Dr. Enimil, President of the Ashanti Region chapter of the Pediatric Society of Ghana, infections are spread when babies share cots. When each baby has a cot, spread of infections would reduce, leading to more newborns surviving and thriving. The “One Baby One Cot” concept was motivated by the political party manifestos being presented by political parties and individuals contesting in the presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana in 2016.

Newborn champions which include traditional leaders, religious leaders and health personnel together visited the MBU at KATH and took a tour around to see some of the premature babies that had been referred to the facility. They each pledged to support the MBU and urged the public to support.

The champions, led by the Ashanti Regional Newborn Focal Person, Dr. Rita Fosu-Yeboah, held a press conference at which the press and members of the public were exposed to Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC), which is a safe way to keep a premature or low birth weight baby warm and healthy. The mother of a premature baby attended the event and demonstrated how she keeps her baby in skin-to-skin contact. She highlighted the usefulness of the KMC and encouraged all mothers and fathers to practice KMC to save their premature babies.
Today started like any other day in my life – my short life because I was conceived just some 8 months ago.

So, as I was saying, today started like any other day in my world – a warm, dark, cozy, quiet world where I was king. All I usually hear is my mum’s voice. She sounds like an angel; she would talk to me and sing to me. Like any other day, I would swim a bit (in the fluid you call amniotic fluid). I would sleep a little, and play a little. I love to chew on my umbilical cord and dance with it. I sometimes even put it on my neck like a little flying tie 😊. As I swam round and round and danced a bit, I heard my mum speak to me. She told me how much she loved me, how she would do anything for me. I think she hopes I am a little girl. I often hear my dad speak to me too. His voice is deep; and when he kisses my mum’s tummy, I swim up to his lips and kiss him back.

So today after all the swimming and dancing and kissing, I fell asleep... a deep long sleep in which I dreamt I was playing with angels in Heaven, at the feet of God. Then all of a sudden, my world began to fall apart. I was thrown and squeezed. It was as if I was forced out of my home. The fluid around me was draining away. It was real – I was forced out! I didn’t know what to do. I thought I would die. ‘Help me’, I whispered. ‘I am too small, too fragile. I am not ready to be born yet. My lungs are not mature. My skin is too light. My tummy is too tiny. Somebody help me please!’

I was thrust forth into a noisy room full of people and bright lights, and it was so cold. Too cold. I longed for my warm cozy, dark, quiet world where I thought I would spend at least a month more. As I lay on my mother’s abdomen and waited for a minute for my cord to be cut, I felt so cold and wet, like a little animal shipwrecked on an island faraway. I felt so alone that I began to cry. I cried out to God (I know Him well because He was always with me and talked with me when I was in my mum’s womb). I said, ‘God, please, let me die peacefully. I can't live here – the infections, the lights, the noise! I can’t handle it. I am not ready. Let me come back to You and Your angels’. In a still, small voice, He answered, ‘Fear not, Little One, for I am with you. I have a host of angels on earth who will help you live. They come in the form of healthcare workers. Your personal guardian angels are your parents, i.e. your mum and your dad. And I will always be here with you.’

As I listened to Him, someone approached and rubbed me dry. She cut my cord and placed me in between my mum’s breasts. I could hear my mum’s heart beating again. I could feel her warmth. I could sense her breasts filling with milk specially made for my tiny sensitive tummy. I was safe! Her body would protect me from infections. When I forget to breathe, her breathing would remind me. The peacefulness would help me sleep and help my brain develop. I felt warm, calm and loved, lying in between my mum’s breasts, hearing her heart beat.

I began to drift off to sleep as I lay there; and I heard God asking me gently, ‘Little One, how are you? Do you think you can make it?’ I smiled at Him and said, ‘With the help of the host of healthcare workers and my parents, though I was born too small and born too soon, I will survive!’

Sometimes, the most beautiful gifts come in small packages 😊.
128,000 Premature babies born every year in Ghana

Ghana has been recording about 128,000 premature births every year, and doctors are advocating cost effective care to save them from dying. Dr. Rita Fosu-Yeboah, a Paediatrician, said 75 per cent of deaths among them was preventable. It was important to make deliberate effort to teach health workers and mothers about how to properly take care of such babies.

Speaking at the celebration of this year’s ‘World Preterm Day’ in Kumasi, she said they needed to be assisted to practice the ‘Kangaroo Mother Care’. This involves ‘skin-to-skin positioning of low birth weight baby upright between the mother’s breast or adult’s chest’ and exclusive breastfeeding. Dr. Fosu-Yeboah, additionally urged early discharge and frequent follow-up visits to the hospital. She encouraged women to access health care before and during pregnancy and said that was vital to prevent preterm births.

Premature births are an enormous global problem that is exacting a huge toll emotionally, physically and financially on families, medical systems and economies. Identified causes include multiple pregnancy, urinary tract infections in pregnancy, hypertension, pre-eclampsia, diabetes in pregnancy, malnutrition and inadequate antenatal care. Teenage pregnancy, close spacing of pregnancies, smoking, alcohol and illegal use of drugs and domestic violence are the other factors.

Dr. Fosu-Yeboah indicated that the survival of premature babies must become a collective responsibility, and said, ‘let us change the face of prematurity through our understanding, sharing of knowledge and working together’.