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Development

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From the Secretary of State

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Tony Dykes
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Dear Tony,

Thank you for your letter of 17 May to the Prime Minister about the eradication of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. As the Secretary of State for International Development, I am replying as the Minister who leads on the issues you raised.

I wholeheartedly agree that it is unacceptable that there were more than 400,000 new paediatric AIDS infections in 2008, when there are proven, effective interventions to prevent HIV infection from mothers to their infants.

Improving maternal health is inextricably linked to the health of infants and children, and we have made this a priority. DFID is supporting the scale up of Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) services, within our broader efforts to improve maternal and child health services, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence shows that family planning is an effective way of reducing mother to child transmission of HIV. Through our support to governments, civil society and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), we are committed to expand family planning and HIV prevention services in Africa.

In Zimbabwe we are supporting better integration of maternal health and HIV services, including the supply of more efficacious PMTCT drugs and efforts to better reach women. And in South Africa we have supported the PMTCT Accelerated Plan pilot phase. This programme is now being rolled out to all priority districts.

The UK Government is also working with development partners and through the Inter-agency Task Team on Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (co-convened by UNICEF and WHO) to increase the percentage of HIV positive pregnant women who receive anti-retrovirals to reduce the risk of mother to child transmission. Latest data show encouraging trends in the expansion of PMTCT services for women and children but we are still far off the international target to reach 80% of HIV positive pregnant women.

We are also working with the international community to take forward the Consensus for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, which has the slogan "Every pregnancy wanted, every birth safe, every newborn and child healthy" and which aims to save the lives of over 10 million women and children by 2015. The Consensus builds on the idea that achieving improved results in maternal and child health depends on better functioning health systems which can provide the continuity of care across maternal, newborn and child health which is needed. The UK is working to ensure that prevention of mother-to-child transmission is part of the Consensus' agreed package of interventions.

Building on this, DFID is working with the United Nations Secretary's General's office to develop a new "Joint Effort" to accelerate progress on Maternal, Newborn and Child health. The intention is to produce an agreed framework for action for the 2010 Millennium Development Goal Summit. We are working with the Canadian G8 Presidency and other G8 member states to ensure that the G8 links into the "Joint Effort" process to fast track progress on women's and children's health.

I can assure you that I intend to put women and children's health at the heart of our programming and our international engagement. The UK Government will push hard to ensure that the Global Development Action Plan includes commitments and targets for PMTCT and is endorsed at the MDG Summit in New York in September.

With best wishes to you,

Yours ever,

Andrew Mitchell

ANDREW MITCHELL