

# Leading health and philanthropic organizations outline plan to address global preterm birth burden

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Leading researchers and global health organizations today issued a call-to-action to advance a comprehensive research agenda to address the global burden of preterm birth, which has become the leading cause of newborn deaths worldwide.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Global Alliance to Prevent Prematurity and Stillbirth (GAPPS), an initiative of Seattle Children's, and the March of Dimes Foundation convened scientific experts from around the world to develop a "Solution Pathway" for [preterm birth](#). This strategic research plan spans the spectrum of discovery, development, and delivery research needed to both accelerate prevention and reduce preterm birth death and disability. Developed by more than 30 scientific experts in the field of preterm birth and maternal-child health, the agenda was published as a commentary online today in *The Lancet Global Health*.

The agenda calls for:

- Innovative research in the biology of pregnancy and preterm birth, and bringing new technologies and methodologies to the field of preterm research and prevention.
- Accelerating research for use of practical and affordable interventions known to improve survival of preterm infants in

- low- and middle-income countries.
- Improving availability of data to better understand the global burden of preterm birth, identify populations at risk, and evaluate impact of programs aimed at reducing preterm birth and death and disability.
- Fostering innovation and collaboration to translate research into practice.

Specific areas recommended for further research include:

- Understanding the complex biology of pregnancy, how the body maintains a healthy pregnancy, and the complex interplay of the immune system, inflammation, hormonal control and factors of the social and physical environment that can cause infants to be born preterm.
- Investigating the female microbiome and how it relates to maintaining health as well as infection, inflammation, the immune response and preterm birth.
- The influences and interactions of genes and social and environmental factors.

"Multiple global initiatives have gained critical momentum to address neonatal mortality and. . . recent scientific advancements create a new opportunity for transformative research into the complex biology of pregnancy," the authors say.

The development of a shared research agenda comes at a time when multiple global initiatives have gained crucial momentum to address newborn mortality and preterm birth, including the Millennium Development Goals, Every Woman Every Child, and the Every Newborn global action plan. Other publications in conjunction with World Prematurity Day 2013 on November 17 include six research articles in *Pediatric Research* underscoring the urgent need for governments and

organizations to enhance research efforts, prevention programs and care. These articles outline the high risk of disability among children born preterm, and the urgent need for improved care and prevention.

Additionally, the journal *BMC Reproductive Health* will release a series of six papers based on the 2012 report "Born Too Soon: The Global Action Report on Premature Birth," developed by the March of Dimes, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, Save the Children, and the World Health Organization, with more than 50 organizations involved.

Preterm birth (birth before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy) is the leading cause of death in the first month of life, and babies who survive an early birth often face the risk of lifetime health challenges. Each year, an estimated 6.6 million children die worldwide by the age of 5 years. Of those, 44 percent die within the first month of life. Preterm birth is the second leading cause of all child deaths under the age of 5, the leading cause of newborn death, and a leading cause of severe disability, such as cerebral palsy.

**More information:** "A Solution Pathway for Preterm Birth: Accelerating a Priority Research Agenda to Address the Global Burden of Preterm Birth," by Eve M. Lackritz, MD, and colleagues, appears in *The Lancet Global Health*, Vol. 1, No. 6, Dec. 2013, online at [www.thelancet.com/lancetgh](http://www.thelancet.com/lancetgh)

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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