



If you have never heard of a birthing kit you might wonder what they are and then assume it is information or pointers on what you would need to have in a birthing situation. Particularly with the wealth of self-help books in the bookstore, this would be another “how to” book aimed at potential parents. If you were in Europe, you would be able to buy a “standard” or “de luxe” birthing kit, that relieves the problem of what one needs, especially if one is giving birth at home, which is not as unusual in Europe as here in Australia. In fact, one business in the United Kingdom is amazed at how their business has flourished, marketing to midwives, hospitals and individuals.

However, these are the not the birthing kits which concern UNICEF, The World Health Organisation and The Birthing Kit Foundation of Australia. These birthing kits are kits that help women give birth in a situation, which is more sanitary than would be otherwise. Volunteers, here in Australia, and elsewhere in the world, put together the kits, which are despatched to developing countries to improve

What is a Birthing Kit?



- *1m x 1m plastic sheet for the mother to lie on*
- *a piece of soap*
- *2 gloves*
- *3 gauze squares*
- *3 cord ties / 2 umbilical clamps*
- *sterile scalpel blade*

conditions that lead to better birthing situations for both mother and child. It is unfortunately a fact that each year eighteen million women throughout the world give birth in insanitary conditions.

These birthing kits cost two dollars to make and consist of plastic sheeting, a cake of soap, disposable gloves, a surgical blade

for the umbilical cord and gauze to clean the newborn's eyes. Once assembled, the birthing kits are sent to their destination and with the help of NGOs they are distributed at no cost. In Australia, The Australian Defence Forces help, whenever there is space available in aircraft and other transport, to deliver the kits wherever they are needed.

The World Health Organisation's latest statistics on childbirth, estimates that there are 536,000 maternal deaths annually throughout the world during childbirth. 99% of these deaths occur in developing countries and for every woman who dies, another thirty women occur injuries and infections which often lead to a life which can be disabling, painful and which is sometimes lifelong. This amounts to 15,000,000 women who will suffer from the effects of childbearing.

In Africa 60% of women give birth each year without a skilled attendant, one million stillbirths occur during labour, and nearly 300,000 babies die of asphyxia soon after birth. UNICEF is active in the promotion of education, a tetanus vaccination program for women, skilled attendants, and the promotion of clean birth conditions using birthing kits. Improving ante-natal care and improvement in dealing with obstetric complications are all part of the ongoing efforts of UNICEF, the WHO and other NGO's to reduce these statistics. The majority of births in developing countries, however, occur in conditions where to provide a kit that has materials for a clean environment in which to give birth is a practical and free way to improve the outcome for thousands of mothers and babies.

In Australia, birthing kit assembly was pioneered by the Zonta Club of Adelaide in 1999. They packed and sent the first birthing kits, numbering one hundred to Papua New Guinea in that year. From that year, more than 550,000 kits have been sent to

26 countries worldwide. Since 2006, the birthing kit program has been managed by The Birthing Kit Foundation (Australia) and Zonta Clubs throughout Australia hold days where the kits are assembled and packed ready for transportation. Thus the first goal of the Foundation is holding these assembly days and funding the making and then the transportation of the kits to where they are needed. The Foundation is now working in cooperation with AusAID and this will mean approximately 150,000 kits will be made here in Australia every year with another 20,000 being made in countries abroad. This arrangement now means the Foundation is able to provide dollar-for-dollar assistance based on donations and time from Zonta Clubs and other new participants, such as Rotary.

From a very small beginning in 1999 with the Adelaide Zonta Club sending those kits to Papua New Guinea, The Birthing Kit Foundation is now committed to:

- Supplying birthing kits to women giving birth at home in remote regions of developing countries with a high maternal mortality rate.
- Community development involving the development of funded training programs of 3 – 5 days duration where village nurses and traditional birth attendants receive midwifery, hygiene and nutrition education to complement the kits. This also involves the development of relationships within each country.
- Sustainability by researching ways to make the provision of kits and health education totally funded and organised in-country.

The Foundation's goals are worthy ones which grew from the Zonta focus to "enhance the status of women worldwide." Women, as we know, particularly in developing countries often do not have a voice and birthing kits are one way to improve their future. The goals will improve the livelihood of women and their babies during childbirth in countries where facilities are not available or beyond their reach financially.