

# First World Birth Defects Day 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2015



The Malta Congenital Anomalies Registry, together with and on behalf of a network of several worldwide partners, would like to announce the launch of a *World Birth Defects Day* which is to be observed on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 throughout the world. The aim of this day is to raise awareness about birth defects and to help people to understand the issues families and their affected children face around the world. Birth defects contribute to a substantial number of Rare Diseases, which Malta is committed to address through the development of a Rare Disease Strategy. It is often challenging, though of significant importance, to ensure that optimal care is provided to all affected individuals and their families and to gather support for reducing and where possible preventing the occurrence of birth defects.

Birth defects occur at the rate of 3% of all births. In Malta, a baby with one or more major birth defects is born every 3 days. Birth defects are a main cause of infant mortality. In Malta, over the 10-year period 2003-2012, birth defects led to 104 infant deaths, this accounts for 43.5% of all infant deaths. Among those children who survive, several may suffer lifelong disabilities and are costly on both an individual and a social level.

Most birth defects occur early in pregnancy, sometimes even before a woman even knows she is pregnant. This is the reason why preconception health and care is a critical tool for primary prevention. Some birth defects are preventable and parents-to-be can benefit from preconception care to prevent birth defects. Taking folic acid supplements at the right time is a great primary prevention and public health success. It is also known that modifying certain risk factors such as maternal diabetes, obesity, unhealthy nutrition, smoking and alcohol can decrease the occurrence of birth defects. Further research is still required to find more and more modifiable risk factors.

Birth defects can impact every organ system in the body, from head to toe; still most people do not understand or appreciate their social impact on the child and family. On a global level, over the past 20 years, those working in the field of birth defects have witnessed a shrinking interest and dwindling funding for birth defect surveillance, research, and prevention efforts. This

situation with lack of information and resources is frustrating to professionals, parents and parents to be. Furthermore, parents of affected children might not be aware of the services available. It is important to raise awareness about birth defects, how to prevent them, how to treat them, and whether or not services are available and where.

As a first step a worldwide network of organizations will be announcing March 3, 2015 as the first World Birth Defects Day to improve awareness and stimulate action among public, governments, non-governmental organizations, and health care providers in support of people with birth defects and of parents-to-be.

The following ten international organizations involved in the field of Birth Defects and/or in the field of Maternal and Child Health have agreed to promote this Day:

1. CDC-Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, Atlanta, US
2. ECLAMC-Estudio Colaborativo Latino-Americano Malformaciones Congénitas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Buenos Aires, Argentina
3. EUROCAT-European Congenital Anomalies Surveillance, Belfast, UK
4. ICBDSR-International Clearinghouse for Birth Defects Surveillance and Research, Salt Lake City, US and Rome, Italy
5. IFSBH-International Federation of Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus, Brussels, Belgium
6. MoD-March of Dimes, New York, US
7. NBDPN-National Birth Defects Prevention Network, Houston, US
8. PAHO-Pan-American Health Organization, Montevideo, Uruguay
9. PMNCH-Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, Genève, Switzerland
10. SEARO-South-East Asia Regional Office of WHO, New Delhi, India

The Malta Congenital Anomalies Registry, within the Directorate of Health Information and Research, is joining these organisations in recognizing the World Birth Defects Day. On the occasion of the first World Birth Defects Day a Fact Sheet is being released by the Malta Congenital Anomalies Registry, this can be accessed on: [https://ehealth.gov.mt/HealthPortal/chief\\_medical\\_officer/healthinfor\\_research/intro2.aspx](https://ehealth.gov.mt/HealthPortal/chief_medical_officer/healthinfor_research/intro2.aspx).