

## Preconception Health Goes Global

By Sarah Verbiest

With significant preconception health partnerships in the U.S. (PCHHC) and Europe (PrePreg Network) in place and emerging interest in the topic by the World Health Organization, the promotion of the importance of preconception health is now gaining its place on the larger world stage.

For the U.S., the March of Dimes is playing a pivotal role in highlighting the importance of preconception health and moving this agenda forward. Their recent report, *Born Too Soon, The Global Action Report on Preterm Birth* ([www.marchofdimes.com/borntoosoon](http://www.marchofdimes.com/borntoosoon)), includes a chapter on the role of preconception health in improving birth outcomes. The March of Dimes and the CDC are playing leadership roles in the international discourse on this topic.

Out of Europe, the Netherlands has launched the **Preparing for Life Initiative** which they hope will eventually become a global clearinghouse for preconception health. Their website can be accessed at <http://www.preparingforlife.net/>. Their aim is to improve women's health and to reduce maternal and child mortality and morbidity by avoiding preventable risks. Their vision is that all children are born healthy, wanted and loved. Their mission is to bridge the gap between top level expertise and families in need of it. This group collaborated with the World Health Organization to host an international expert meeting on preconception care in February 2012 in Geneva. Their approach is to highlight preconception care as part of the maternal, newborn and child health continuum and to leverage the benefits of preconception care to meet the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium development goals of the United Nations. A future issue of this newsletter will feature the report from this meeting and the development of the WHO Initiative.

### The Ethics of Preconception Health

A variety of ethical issues surrounding preconception health were raised during the WHO meeting and again at the European Summit. International women's rights groups have concerns about how preconception health is framed. They have spent many years promoting the health of women as an essential value in and of itself. They are concerned about the use of the word "preconception" which tends to focus on a woman's reproductive role and as always "potentially" pregnant (thinking about unintended pregnancy). They are concerned about backlash that might question women's access to tobacco / alcohol and to certain types of jobs if those exposures could harm a future fetus. Concerns about preconception health as being "pronatalist" still surface in the U.S. today. As we move forward it is important to reach out to feminists and other groups to discuss the language and frames that are used internationally in preconception health.

A speaker on ethics at the Summit raised several other issues. The first was around the idea of a parent's moral commitment to their future offspring / the parent's role of the prevention of serious harm to their child. When preconception health is discussed as a group of services that can improve the mother's health and the father's health it is not controversial. But in the context of potential harm to future offspring for the lack of health before pregnancy (intentional exposures) – this becomes a

different ethical issue for discussion. A second issue focused on the rapidly expanding number of screening panels couples will be able to use to test themselves (and their fetus) for a wide range of diseases and traits. As these become more available there will be a growing need for monitoring of counseling and discussions about how these tests are or are not part of preconception care. The third issue raised even more complicated questions for the field of medically assisted reproduction, when a health care provider is directly involved in the conceiving of a child. Finally, a disability rights group at the Summit raised the issue of the value of diversity in a society and the need for support for families who avoid genetic testing, are at genetic risk and/or who choose to carry a child with an anomaly.

While a deeper discussion of these issues is far beyond the scope of this newsletter, the discussion at the Summit raised several important areas that deserve ongoing dialogue as this movement expands over time and borders.

### **An International Definition of Preconception Health:**

*Preconception care is any intervention provided to women of childbearing age, regardless of pregnancy desire, before pregnancy to improve health outcomes for women, newborns and children. Preconception care envisions a continuum of healthy women, healthy mothers and healthy children; and promotes reproductive health for couples. Preconception care recognizes that boys and men are affected by and contribute to many health issues and risk factors that influence maternal and child health such as sexually transmitted infections, smoking and partner violence. Preconception care must reach girls and women, boys and men so that they are health in their own right and so that they promote the health of mothers and newborns.*