

Maternal Instinct

You could be forgiven for thinking that vast numbers of women dying in childbirth was a problem confined to the dark ages, yet for AUT PhD student Kate Heard, it's still a tragedy on a global scale.

Heard, whose research is centred around reducing maternal mortality in the developing world, is currently in India attending a Global Maternal Health Conference. However, despite the priority given to reducing maternal mortality from a number of major global health conferences, the situation for childbearing women across the globe is dire, with one woman dying every minute, needlessly, in their effort to bring a child into this world, says Heard.

"Despite reducing maternal mortality being the outcome of one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG5), and the sustained efforts of aid workers and research advocates for the past 20 years, women are still dying at unprecedented rates in many of the world's developing nations."

Originally from a broadcasting background, Heard was motivated to make the transition from media to midwifery after experiencing serious complications during her own

pregnancy and giving birth. Heard - a recent recipient of an AUT University Vice-Chancellor Doctoral Scholarship - came to the realisation that a high standard of midwifery care is integral to saving mothers and babies lives, however it was only after travelling to developing countries such as Bangladesh, Senegal and India that she appreciated the gravity of the problem.

"My experiences in Senegal and Bangladesh were a big reality check. I realised that I couldn't save the world, but I did see firsthand how maternal mortality impacts on people's lives and the complexities involved in 'fixing' the problem."

Measuring maternal mortality is challenging at best and there is a dearth of qualitative research on the subject, says Heard. It is predominantly through the writings of journalists that the voices of those who are striving to achieve this goal are heard.

Heard has found her media skills to be a huge asset whilst undertaking her research that looks at the experience of aid workers currently based in at risk developing



nations, who face ongoing challenges trying to establish a user friendly maternal child health care service. Heard anticipates her research will add to a growing body of knowledge surrounding

maternal mortality and will potentially contribute to the future direction of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, all in the hope of saving more women's lives.

Running Man

With spring in the air, there is also an extra spring in the steps for many Aucklanders as they prepare for the upcoming adidas Auckland Marathon on October 31.

To help get these athletes on point, Kelly Sheerin, one of AUT's leading sports scientists and Manager of the AUT Running Mechanics Clinic, has been leading a series of running specific workshops and seminars in partnership with adidas, the events key sponsor. The series of workshops and seminars provide both recreational runners and elite athletes with training techniques which can enhance performance and assist in the prevention of running-related injuries.

These special clinics, which have been running since July, have proven popular with marathon participants getting geared up for the event.

"We've had a real demand for the workshops and seminars in preparation for the Auckland Marathon, with over 300 people attending so far. Our workshops and seminars will assist all levels of runners, whether they are beginners, intermediate or advanced," Sheerin says.

The final seminar prior to the Auckland Marathon takes place on September 25 and will look at tips, tricks and special techniques to prepare for the event.

The AUT Running Mechanics Clinic - based on AUT's North Shore Campus - is open to anyone and everyone all year round. The purpose of the Running Mechanics Clinic is to provide a specialist service for enhancing athletic performance whilst also considering



prevention or rehabilitation of running related injuries, says Sheerin.

Assessments take into account the strength, flexibility, injuries and goals of the individual. Sheerin, a qualified physiotherapist, modeled the AUT Running Mechanics Clinic on the University of Calgary's Running Injury Clinic in Canada, where he spent time helping to develop their research programme and analysing running mechanics.

In conjunction with adidas, Sheerin has also been undertaking a nationwide running survey of over 800 runners in recent months, where information on running techniques, frequency of training, and the nature of injuries sustained has been collected. Results of the survey will be released before the end of the year, and Sheerin anticipates this will help identify patterns of injury and improve overall health and habits of the country's running population.

Childbirth and marathon running are extreme endurance events - pinnacles of human performance and experience. Yet, they have other links; the capacity for upright mobility requires highly specialised body structures. Their gradual evolution was connected to, and on a collision course with another evolutionary trend - the development of a large brain. The conflict has been accommodated in various ways including delaying some brain growth until after birth and adaptations to female anatomy and physiology. However, the resolution is only partial and childbirth involves risk for mother and baby.

Competent midwifery and medical support, along with better living conditions, have greatly reduced this risk. Doctoral student Kate Heard's research reminds us that this is not the case for vast numbers of women in developing nations where reduced maternal mortality remains a major public health challenge. It also causes one to reflect on media comments about New Zealand

having 'third world' health services. There are periods of seasonal overcrowding in hospital emergency departments and things that go wrong. More needs to be done to prevent and remedy this, and to better engage people at greatest risk. However, despite funding constraints and other challenges, overall this country provides high quality, accessible care in community and hospital settings.

For North Shore residents it is also reassuring to know that the recent New Zealand Health Survey shows we live longer than people in other parts of the country and perform best on almost all health indicators. Subsequently, this brings us back to running - or at least brisk walking, and other diet, lifestyle and environmental factors which are key health drivers, and at the very least they are a fence at the top of the cliff.



Max Abbott, Pro Vice-Chancellor, North Shore

Health: The Wealth of the Nation Symposium

Healthcare professionals hold the key to facilitating better access to holistic health services. You are invited to evaluate perspectives and research presented by prominent commentators in the health sector.

Date: 24-25 November 2010
Venue: AUT North Shore Campus
Register online: www.healthwealthsymposium.co.nz