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## A painful birth for free medical assistance in Haiti

By Jordi Zamora (AFP) – 6 days ago

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Photo 1 of 3 A set of three small, light-colored navigation icons: a left-pointing arrow, a right-pointing arrow, and a magnifying glass.



PORT AU PRINCE — Women can give birth for free at the Isaie Jeanty hospital in the Haitian capital thanks to foreign aid -- but hospital equipment theft is so rampant an operating room has been closed almost since the site opened.

Isaie Jeanty is an example of how millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, can sometimes create obstacles as the country strives towards economic development.

"It is scandalous that the operating room was used for only one month," said Henriette Chamouillet, the local representative of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), as she leads a group of donors on a hospital tour.

The hospital director, Camille Figaro, rushes to unlock the doors to the unused room.

Inside the brand-new operating table seems unused, and it's covered with dust. The floor is dirty, and the medical equipment shelves are empty.

"Where is the equipment?" Chamouillet asks.

"There was no equipment," answers Figaro.

As Chamouillet continues her tour with the group, which includes PAHO Director Mirta Roses and representatives of the Organization of American States (OAS), Figaro sheepishly admits that "perhaps" the equipment is being used in the gynecology section.

At the Isaie Jeanty hospital, one of 49 Haitian hospitals where PAHO pays for obstetric services, women do not pay to give birth but do pay for gynecological operations such as removing an ovarian cyst or a tubal ligation.

This may solve the mystery of the missing equipment -- moved to an area of the hospital that can generate revenue.

But neither Chamouillet nor Roses -- whose group subsidized building the operating room four years ago -- are swayed by the argument.

PAHO pays 40 dollars for every birth at the hospital, and patients pay nothing, not even for C-sections or medicine.

"The lists are controlled" with help from anonymous collaborators, Roses told AFP. "But we cannot control the corruption."

Heavily pregnant women line up to deliver in the hospital, sitting on wooden benches or standing in the halls as they wait their turn. Screams coming from women who are giving birth can be heard in the hallway, which are clean but bare.

"We don't have sheets," Figaro says, pleading for assistance.

"We can't give sheets, that's not our responsibility," Chamouillet says.

In a room packed with patients, a woman who gives her name only as Maria smiles weakly.

Four days earlier she had a Cesarean and gave birth to a boy, who is clean and sleeps peacefully.

"I paid nothing," she says. She closes her eyes and rubs her belly.

When asked if she paid for her medicine, her eyes open wide. "Any chance you can lend me some money?" she asks.

The female mortality rate at birth in Haiti was at nearly 700 women for each 100,000 births before the PAHO program began, the highest in all the Americas, according to the health group. At that time two-thirds of Haiti's pregnant women gave birth at home.

But since the aid program began in 2005, the mortality rate has dropped in hospitals in the PAHO program to 130 for each 100,000 births.

For that reason assistance to the Jeanty hospital will continue, despite the vanishing equipment or lack of sheets, Chamouillet and Roses said.

Oversight however will be tighter, they insist.

"It's clean and they meet their commitment of not charging," Roses said.

Haiti asked for more international community aid for next year, and at a conference of donors in April collected 327 million dollars in pledged assistance.

"There's never been such a high commitment from the international community" since the arrival of a United Nations military stabilization force in 2004, OAS Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin, who headed a delegation of senior officials to Haiti, told reporters.

"But if you put the bar too high, you will become disappointed," he said.

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