

## **17th November 2011 – First World Prematurity Awareness Day**

Worldwide, one baby in ten is born premature: Every year, about 13 million children are born too early - 500,000 in Europe. Thus, preterm babies represent the largest child patient group and their number continues to increase, even as the total number of births is steadily decreasing. Despite this high number, public is only hardly aware of the prevention of preterm birth and the problems and risks involved in the development of a preterm infant.

After having celebrated already two International Prematurity Awareness Days, 17th November 2011 became the first ever World Prematurity Day. On this occasion all those involved in pregnancy and childbirth drew attention to the concerns of preterm babies and their families.

In 2009, 17th November became the official Prematurity Awareness Day and has been celebrated with a multitude of events by the “Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants” (EFCNI) and its European partner organisations. The date was decided upon during the first meeting of the European Parents’ Organisations on 18th November 2008 in Rome, Italy, which had been initiated by EFCNI. The reason for choosing 17th November was that this date has a very special meaning for one of EFCNI’s founders: After the decease of his preterm triplets in December 2006 he became father of a healthy born daughter on 17th November 2008. At the same time March of Dimes, an American charity organisation for preterm and newborn infants, had a similar idea and launched a Prematurity Awareness Day on 17th November in the USA likewise. So this date seemed to be meant for uniting and jointly launching the World Prematurity Day. In the meanwhile, the African organisation “LittleBigSouls” and the Australian “National Premmie Foundation” have joined and we are delighted that organisations from Canada and Middle East planned activities for World Prematurity Day 2011, too.

For the first time the Global Alliance, which unites African, Australian, European and U.S. umbrella associations of parents’ organisations, has initiated a Facebook website in order to jointly draw attention to the World Prematurity Day and to announce their events and activities. Interested and concerned people will find further information and have the opportunity to actively state their interest: <http://www.facebook.com/WorldPrematurityDay>

In honor of World Prematurity Day 2011 EFCNI launched in cooperation with the medical and safety company Dräger the first European campaign for preterm and newborn infants. The project “ene, mene, mini. one in ten babies is born premature. worldwide.” promotes a political “Call to Action for Newborn Health” in 26 different languages. The aim is to improve the care of pregnant women as well as preterm and newborn babies and to persuade EU institutions and national governments to finally taking care of this subject. Preterm infants need your vote! For more information, please visit: <http://www.ene-mene-mini.eu>

Also in 2011, European parents’ organisations and healthcare experts celebrated this particular day with events and activities in order to attract attention. The focus was on the first common campaign “ene, mene, mini”. Clothes lines with baby socks at different European locations were supposed to convey the topic of preterm birth. One pair of “preemie socks” was pegged out in between ten pairs of “term born baby socks” - not always on the same place but randomly distributed as a preterm birth may happen to anyone: In about half of all cases of preterm birth, the exact cases remain unknown! The direct comparison on the line shows the enormous difference in size: Preterm socks match with the size of doll socks – this little are the feet of a preterm baby.

## **Information about premature birth**

### What is a premature birth?

A premature birth is when a baby is born before the end of the 37th week of pregnancy. A normal pregnancy lasts 40 weeks. Premature babies generally weigh less than 2,500 grammes. The lowest-weight premature baby to survive was born in 2006 in the 22nd week of the pregnancy. At that point, the baby weighed 280 grammes and was 24 cm long.

### Causes

The most frequent causes of premature births:

- vaginal infections are responsible for about 50 per cent of premature births. They progress up the vagina and trigger contractions which cannot be stopped.
- smoking, diet and stress can likewise be causes.
- elderly prima gravida (mother carrying her first child is old).
- multiple births, also as a result of fertility treatments.

A problem in researching the causes is inadequate statistical and other data

### Are there any sensible precautions?

It is especially important to obtain information about the causes of premature birth and to make pregnant women and their families aware of and sensitive to this topic.

Self-monitoring and self-observation during pregnancy are also of key significance. A woman can use a special glove to determine the pH at the entrance to the vagina herself, and thus detect any changes which might indicate an infection at an early stage. However, this important examination is not available to every pregnant woman across the board, as it depends on which health insurance company she belongs to.

There is also a lack of adequate information for women contemplating having a baby about preventing the severe disease spina bifida which can affect any newborn. The simple preventive consumption of folic acid, for example, can help reduce the risk of spina bifida.

### Chances of survival and consequences

- The survival rate of children with a birth weight below 1000 grammes is 66 per cent.
- The probability of permanent damage is high.
- The most common late-onset consequences are:
  - o developmental delays
  - o chronic diseases of the respiratory tract
  - o motor disorders
  - o attention disorders

### Premature birth compared across Europe: the European Benchmark Report

- The benchmark report "Too Little, Too Late: Why Europe should do more for preterm infants", 2009/2010, produced by EFCNI, examined the political and medical boundary conditions surrounding the topic of premature birth in thirteen EU member states: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the Czech Republic.
- Whilst the European average proportion of births before the 37th week of pregnancy is just over seven per cent, Germany's rate is poorer at 8.8 percent, putting it just ahead of Austria which comes last at 11.1 per cent.
- With the exception of Sweden, Great Britain and Portugal, there are hardly any co-ordinated natal programmes in the other countries studied, just fragmented attempts.

### Further requirements

The raising of awareness and the provision of information for pregnant women must be improved by means of obligatory standardized informative discussions.

The introduction of controlled quality standards is necessary. This could include a quality seal for neonatal and obstetrics wards, standardized care of premature babies to promote their development, psychological and social/educational care of families and comprehensive management of discharge from hospital.

There has hitherto also been a lack of widespread follow-up facilities in the social medical sphere. These could ensure that families are cared for close to their homes after their hospital stay.

### Where to get Help and Support?

Help and support is provided by the national parents' organisations across Europe listed on the ene, mene, mini website: <http://www.ene-mene-mini.eu>