World Health Organization Executive Board, 150th Session

Pillar 3, Agenda Item 17: Maternal, infant and young child nutrition

Statement by:

- World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies (WFNS)
- International Federation of Surgical Colleges (IFSC)
- World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists (WFSA)
- International Federation of Obstetrics and Gynecology (IFOG)

We thank the Board for the opportunity to present a statement on the importance of mandatory folic acid fortification of staple foods to effectively prevent spina bifida and anencephaly, two devastating neural tube birth defects. We make this statement recognizing the 63rd World Health Assembly Resolution on Birth Defects that appealed to member states to prioritize prevention of birth defects.

We are concerned by the high number of pregnancies affected by folic acid-preventable spina bifida and anencephaly globally.

World-wide at least 300,000 pregnancies are estimated to be affected with spina bifida and anencephaly annually, and 75% of them result in elective terminations, stillbirths, or under-five deaths. Those who survive have life-long paralysis and neurologic impairment; most require multiple surgeries, unavailable in low- and middle-income countries. Families face stigma and cannot afford the cost of care.

Mandatory folic acid fortification is the most effective public health strategy to prevent spina bifida and anencephaly equitably in the population. Fortified staple foods provides folic acid to women of reproductive age at a critical time in pregnancy, without requiring behavior modification, preventing spina bifida and anencephaly.

Mandatory food fortification with folic acid has been implemented in over 60 countries since the late 1990s. Folic acid fortification is safe, effective, and has high cost-benefit ratio. Yet, over 100 countries lack this intervention, adversely impacting the most vulnerable populations.

Folic acid fortification assures adequate maternal blood folate levels ensuring a healthy pregnancy. Most pregnancies are unplanned and providing folic acid through prenatal supplements only after a pregnancy is detected is too late.

Thirty years after gaining knowledge on folic acid only one quarter of all preventable spina bifida and anencephaly are currently prevented world-wide. We urge the World Health Organization to support a resolution on mandatory folic acid fortification of staple foods at the next World Health Assembly.