

Local birthing kits saving lives globally

BY BRENT DAVIS, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO REGION — A simple kit, small enough to fit into a zip-lock bag, can be enough to keep new mothers alive and healthy in developing countries.

And the kits cost less than two dollars a piece. Less than the price of a cup of coffee, to help prevent some of the infections and complications that can claim the lives of as many as half a million women in childbirth each year. It's estimated that another 15 million women suffer injuries or infections.

"The number is starting to decrease, but it has a long way to go," said Joan Westcott of the Zonta Club of Kitchener-Waterloo. The local club has joined others in preparing birthing kits for shipment to places such as Haiti, Ghana, Mali and Nicaragua.

More than 30 members spent a recent Saturday prepping 1,000 kits for distribution in earthquake and cholera-ravaged Haiti by the Mennonite Central Committee.

"Our members were really anxious to be involved with Haiti in some way if we could," Westcott said.

The goal is to provide as clean and sterile a birthing environment as possible for mother, child and birthing attendant. Each kit includes a square plastic sheet for the mother to lie on, a piece of soap, a pair of gloves, umbilical tape, a scalpel blade and five gauze pads.

"It seems such a simple combination of materials," Westcott said. "But it makes such a difference."

Clubs in the district have assembled 6,500 kits this fall. The Zonta Club requires that a distribution program already be in place in the countries to ensure the kits don't sit unused.

The Zonta Club works to advance the status of women, both locally and internationally. The local chapter is already looking to prepare another 1,000 kits for shipment in the spring.

Donations help keep costs in check. The club is accepting contributions of vinyl or latex gloves and four-inch square gauze pads, and financial donations to offset material and shipping costs. For more information, contact information is available at www.zontakw.com.

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Philip Walker, Record staff
Zonta Club's Muriel Omand-Naylor (left) and Joan Westcott assemble birthing kits for distribution in troubled countries.