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One April night, 19-year-old Ilionelle was struggling to give birth at her home in rural northwest Haiti. After several hours, she began having seizures, a clear indication of eclampsia, a severe medical disorder that can lead to the death of the mother, the baby, or both.

Tilma, the traditional birth attendant (TBA) helping Ilionelle, quickly identified these life-threatening symptoms and arranged for her transport to Beraca Hospital for emergency obstetric care. After being carried on a stretcher for four hours along a steep and treacherous road, Ilionelle arrived at Beraca Hospital where she safely delivered a healthy baby boy. “If it wasn’t for Tilma, both my son and I could have died,” she said.

Tilma has been delivering babies in her community for 22 years with basic skills training that she received from her late mother, who was also a TBA. Through the PEPFAR [2]-funded, USAID [3]-implemented Santé pour le Développement et la Stabilité d’Haïti [4] (SDSH) project, Tilma received additional training on performing safe deliveries, identifying signs of high-risk pregnancies, and referring at-risk pregnant women to health facilities for care. This training was vitally important for Tilma who works in Port-de-Paix, a region of Haiti where just 37 percent of births take place at a health facility.

Tilma is grateful to SDSH and its implementer, Management Sciences for Health, for facilitating monthly trainings that teach her new clinical skills. “I didn’t know I had to wash my hands before and after delivering a baby. I also didn’t know the importance of wearing gloves before each delivery, but thanks to the project, now I know the procedures for a successful delivery,” she said.

Haiti has the highest maternal mortality rate in the Western hemisphere with 350 deaths per 100,000 live births. To improve maternal health in Haiti, SDSH has trained 732 TBAs. Trainees each receive 40 hours of training over five months, empowering them with the knowledge and skills to provide quality care to pregnant women and newborns. SDSH plans to train 2,000 additional TBAs in 2013.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.msh.org/users/woodline-gedeon>

[2] <http://www.pepfar.gov>

[3] <http://usaid.gov>

[4] <http://www.msh.org/global-presence/haiti-sdsh.cfm>