

The UN World Conjoined Twins Day—a call to global action

The UN has declared November 24 as World Conjoined Twins Day,¹ an initiative led by Saudi Arabia to raise global awareness about the medical and societal challenges faced by conjoined twins and their families. This rare condition occurs in approximately one in every 75 000 births, often resulting in miscarriage, stillbirth, or early death due to severe congenital disabilities.² For those who survive, the challenges are immense, as some conjoined twins share vital organs such as the heart, brain, or liver. Survival often depends on complex separation surgeries, for which success rates range from 50% to 90%, depending on the organs involved.^{3,4}

Advances in preoperative planning, imaging, and surgical techniques have substantially improved outcomes in the past two decades.⁵ However, postoperative care is equally important to provide ongoing support for physical rehabilitation, psychological wellbeing, and social integration. Beyond the medical difficulties, conjoined twins and their families frequently face social stigma, financial difficulties, and mental health struggles due to misconceptions and discrimination.⁶ World Conjoined Twins Day aims to address these challenges by fostering understanding and compassion globally.

Saudi Arabia has played a pivotal role in the treatment of conjoined twins, with its medical team having reviewed 141 cases from 26 countries and successfully completing 61 separation surgeries. Remarkably, all medical expenses for these cases were fully covered by the Saudi Government. Building on this experience, Saudi Arabia is collaborating with the UN to establish an international registry documenting the global incidence of conjoined twins. This registry will standardise reporting, enhance research, and improve treatment by

fostering partnerships with national health ministries, medical institutions, and non-governmental organisations. The initiative will be funded by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief).

To further these efforts, KSrelief is organising the first International Conjoined Twins Separation Conference in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) on Nov 24–25, 2024. Cohosted by the Saudi Ministry of National Guard Health Affairs, the event will highlight both scientific advances and the need for coordinated humanitarian efforts. The participation of conjoined twins who have undergone successful separation surgeries will provide powerful testimonials about the impact of specialised medical care.

In the future, KSrelief and its partners plan to launch global awareness campaigns to educate the public about conjoined twins, dispel myths, and reduce stigma. These efforts will include documentaries, social media outreach, and school programmes. Specialist training programmes for surgeons and health-care professionals will be expanded to ensure more regions have the expertise to treat conjoined twins. The creation of multidisciplinary care teams, including surgeons, psychologists, social workers, and rehabilitation specialists, will help provide comprehensive care for both the medical and emotional needs of conjoined twins and their families.

Additionally, family support networks will be established to offer counselling and resources, while increased funding for research will focus on understanding the causes, improving preventive measures for conditions that lead to conjoined births, and advancing treatment options for conjoined twins. Advances in technology such as three-dimensional printing and virtual reality are expected to revolutionise preoperative planning and surgical precision.

A global fund is also envisioned to cover the costs of medical treatment and transportation for families who cannot afford specialised care.

Saudi Arabia aims to develop rapid response teams to provide critical care to conjoined twins born in areas with inadequate medical facilities.

Through these efforts, the establishment of World Conjoined Twins Day marks the beginning of a broad global initiative to improve the quality of life for conjoined twins and their families, transforming challenges into opportunities for compassion, innovation, and global solidarity.

We declare no competing interests.

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¹ Arab News. UN announces World Conjoined Twins Day after Saudi request. July 2, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2541841/saudi-arabia> (accessed July 7, 2024).

² Martínez-Frías ML, Bermejo E, Mendioroz J, et al. Epidemiological and clinical analysis of a consecutive series of conjoined twins in Spain. *J Pediatr Surg* 2009; **44**: 811–20.

³ Frawley G. Conjoined twins in 2020—state of the art and future directions. *Curr Opin Anaesthesiol* 2020; **33**: 381–87.

⁴ Fallon SC, Olutoye OO. The surgical principles of conjoined twin separation. *Semin Perinatol* 2018; **42**: 386–92.

⁵ Al Rabeeah A. Conjoined twins—past, present, and future. *J Pediatr Surg* 2006; **41**: 1000–04

⁶ Carreker C, De Jong H, Javor V, et al. Family support and media considerations with conjoined twins. *Semin Perinatol* 2018; **42**: 393–401.

North Abyei: the humanitarian and health crisis in Sudan

The Abyei Area Administration (Abyei) is disputed between Sudan and South Sudan, having experienced conflict and tensions over the last 18 years. Despite international efforts, this dispute remains unresolved. In June, 2011, an agreement was made to establish joint administration,¹ but this has not yet materialised. Currently, Khartoum (Sudan) manages the north region and Juba

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(South Sudan) oversees the south region. Both of these administrations face challenges in providing services to their communities, which are affected by humanitarian crises, drought, infectious disease outbreaks, armed conflicts, and population displacement.³ Additionally, there are few humanitarian partners available to support the area.

The overall security situation has improved since June 27, 2011, with the establishment of the UN peacekeeping mission—the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei. Delivery of humanitarian aid, and particularly health services, in north Abyei has been severely lacking despite the set up of the UN mission for peacekeeping. Since 2020, only four of five health facilities have been operational, which has left over 200 000 people with substantial barriers to access lifesaving interventions, including immunisation, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health services, mental health services, and medical referral.⁴ The absence of a health information system and a medical supply chain has resulted in a crucial gap in essential medicines across all health system components. The medical workforce of the region is also insufficient to meet clinical needs, with only one medical doctor and 11 health-care workers available across all health facilities. There is a substantial shortage of community health-care workers to support emergency cases, particularly during the rainy season when flooding complicates access to care.

To address these issues, the International Organization for Migration has partnered with the Federal Ministry of Health of Sudan to strengthen the health system of north Abyei. A recent public health assessment revealed major gaps in the health system and ongoing risks from outbreaks, such as measles and arboviral diseases, affecting both animals and humans.⁴

An early warning alert and response network was established in early March, 2023, in Diffra Hospital, north Abyei, to facilitate early detection of and response to infectious disease outbreaks. This initiative has contributed to the reporting of outbreaks, such as suspected acute flaccid paralysis and measles. Under this initiative, a total of 20 084 consultations have been recorded, indicating the usefulness of a surveillance system.⁵

The ongoing war in Sudan has resulted in the displacement of over 10 million people and the emergence of epidemics of cholera, poliomyelitis, measles, and arboviral diseases, such as dengue virus. These consequences of war underscore the need for improving outbreak preparedness and response capacities in conflict zones, including in north Abyei.⁶

We urge Sudan's Federal Ministry of Health to form a professional multidisciplinary health team in north Abyei, comprising public health officers, medical doctors, laboratory technicians, and veterinarians. The team should focus on preparedness and response plans, using strategic risk assessment tools developed by WHO to identify the main public health hazards; additionally, the team should provide support in monitoring the implementation of these plans on the ground. Both short-term and long-term strategies must be developed in collaboration with Sudan's Federal Ministry of Health, local authorities, and humanitarian organisations. Funding remains a constraint: we call on donor communities to support the strengthening of the north Abyei health system. Additionally, given the impact of climate change in north Abyei and elsewhere, a One Health approach is essential for addressing the interconnectedness of health challenges.⁷

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Editorial note: The Lancet Group takes a neutral position with respect to territorial claims in published text.

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- 4 UN. Crisis in Sudan, ongoing fighting 'seriously impacting chances for constructive dialogue' on status of Abyei, Peace Operations Chief tells Security Council. May 7, 2024. <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15691.doc.htm> (accessed Oct 28, 2024).
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- 6 Ali Y, Siddig EE, Ahmed A. Resurgence of cholera amidst ongoing war in Sudan. *Lancet* 2024; published online Oct 17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)02290-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)02290-6).
- 7 Ahmed A, Mohamed NS, Siddig EE, Algaily T, Sulaiman S, Ali Y. The impacts of climate change on displaced populations: a call for action. *J Clim Change Health* 2021; 3: 100057.

Should WHO partner with TikTok to combat misinformation?

In September, 2024, WHO announced a partnership between its Fides network of health influencers and the social media platform TikTok to promote science-based health information and encourage positive health dialogues to counter misinformation.¹

The WHO-TikTok collaboration reflects the paradoxical relationship between digital platforms and public health organisations.² Jeremy Farrar, WHO Chief Scientist, praised its

For more on the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei see <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/>