



Preventing premature deaths

A better understanding of the infections that kill young infants could prevent many unnecessary deaths.

Dr Fikile Mabena is a paediatrician and infectious disease specialist at the University of the Witwatersrand.



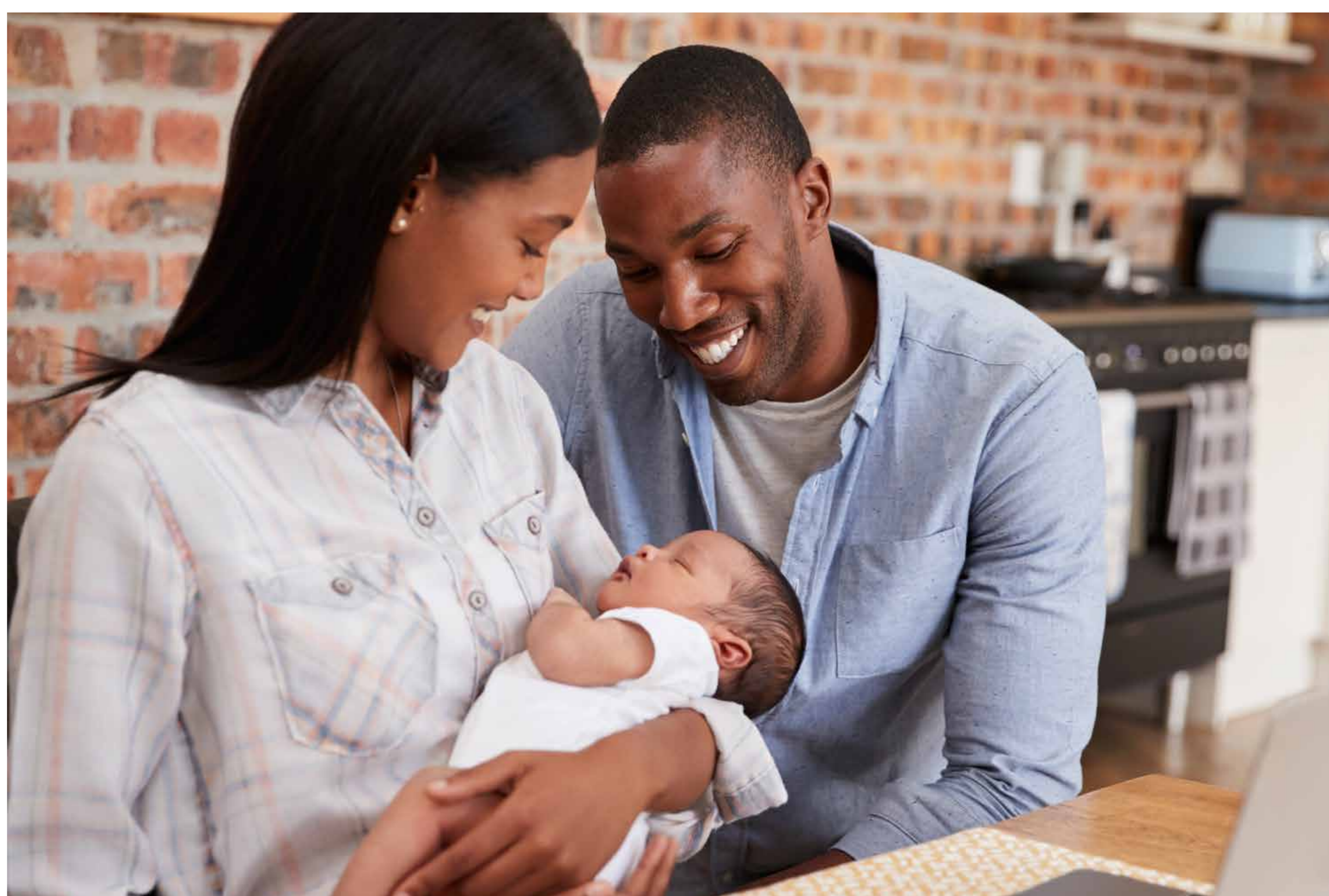
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A better understanding of the specific infections that kill young babies could save many lives.

Innovations such as vaccinations and antiretroviral therapy have saved millions of children around the world in the past two decades. However, the death rates of young babies remain high, with babies younger than three months making up nearly half the deaths of children who die under the age of five.

Infections are one of the leading causes of death in young babies in sub-Saharan Africa, where health professionals rely on imprecise methods to gather data, such as through reports of parents when their children die (verbal autopsies).

“There is still a lack of knowledge of the precise organisms that cause infections in young babies and cause them to be sick and die in these parts of the world,” says Dr Fikile Mabena.

Specific biological methods will be used that accurately determine the exact infections that cause these deaths.

One way of getting better data on the types of infections that cause deaths in babies is to investigate the infections that are carried by babies from birth, throughout their hospital stay. This can be done by isolating

these infections from the babies’ skin and mucosae. Another way is to determine the exact infections that cause deaths with the use of microbiology, histopathology and molecular testing on post-mortem samples of deceased babies.

“A better understanding of the exact infections that are responsible for the severe illnesses and deaths of young babies will inform better treatments and development of vaccines, which will hopefully prevent many deaths,” says Mabena.

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