

Partners

Global strategy for infant and young child feeding launched

Malnutrition accounts for 15.8% of world's disease burden as measured in DALYs and is by far the leading risk factor for disease, with water and sanitation coming second at 6.7% and unsafe sex third at 3.7% (WHO). It is associated with more than 50% of the 10.9 M deaths in children under-5 in developing countries in 2000. One in every 3 children at age 5 in developing countries is stunted, and there is growing evidence that the stunting begins during the age of complementary feeding when the young child makes the transition from breastfeeding to an adult diet.

The World Health Organization is preparing to launch a global strategy for infant and young child feeding to respond to the challenge of improving complementary feeding (Infant and Young Child Nutrition, http://www.who.int/gb/EB_WHA/PDF/EB109/eeb10912.pdf). The strategy, which builds upon experiences from the research and advocacy on breastfeeding of the last century, describes optimal infant and young child feeding recommendations, including for infants and caregivers in difficult circumstances, and summarizes the specific responsibilities that governments, civil society and international organizations should assume to support caregivers and their families to improve infant and young child feeding. While infant feeding is a natural behavior, there is now ample evidence that caregivers need skilled support in order to establish and maintain optimal infant and young child feeding practices. They also need to be protected from adverse commercial influences and be granted appropriate maternity entitlements. The strategy calls for increased investment to improve infant and young child feeding, in the areas of: 1) research leading to effective interventions, 2) the development of global guidelines and recommendations, 3) the design and testing of tools to assist implementation, and 4) support to infant and young child programs which have complementary feeding components such as the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI).

Four key feeding practices will form the main thrust of the strategy: 1) early initiation of breastfeeding, 2) exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months, 3) safe and appropriate complementary feeding from 6 months, and 4) continued breastfeeding up to 2 years or beyond (infant and young child nutrition. Results of a WHO systematic review A54/inf.doc./4.May 2001).

While these practices have been promoted for some time, new knowledge and technology are contributing to a better understanding of specific behaviors and interventions particularly with regard to the adequate composition, appropriate texture, quality and amounts of foods, as well as their safe preparation, storage and feeding. Research into responsive feeding is expected to improve interventions aimed at the caregiver-child interaction not only during feeding in particular but also on childcare in general.

The strategy will be presented during the 109th session of the WHO Executive Board, scheduled from January 14 - 21, 2002 in Geneva and will be presented as well during the World Health Assembly and the UN Special Session on Children in May 2002.

Tools and guidelines in support of this strategy are available and can be obtained from the Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development (CAH) at <http://www.who.int/child-adolescent-health> or the Department of Nutrition for Health and Development (NHD). They include training materials on breastfeeding counselling, HIV and Infant Feeding Counseling, and making health facilities baby-friendly. The recent publication, Complementary Feeding: from breastmilk to family foods (WHO/NHD/00.01, WHO/FCH/CAH/00.6), is the basis of a 3- day course for health professionals, currently under

development. WHO will soon publish the report of a technical consultation on complementary feeding that was held on December 10-13, 2001, which has brought together updated knowledge on biological, behavioral and programmatic aspects of promoting optimal infant and young child feeding. Together with national and international partners, WHO is striving to improve the plight of millions of infant and young children, who suffer from disease and sub-optimal development due to inadequate feeding.

Cecilia Acuin, M.D.

CERTC, University of the Philippines