

MEDIA RELEASE

Breastfeeding saves lives of 30,000 Indonesian children yearly

UNICEF and the Ministry for Women's Empowerment call for action by high-level decision makers to establish supportive policies and programs for women to breastfeed

Jakarta, 8 March 2006

Approximately 30,000¹ deaths of Indonesian children under five years old could be prevented by giving babies exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months. This powerful piece of information was communicated to high-rank government officials today in a workshop hosted by the Minister for Women's Empowerment, Dr. Meutia Hatta Swasono.

Adopting "The Human Cost of Trivializing Breastfeeding" as its theme, the workshop featured a world renown and respected nutrition and pediatric expert, Dr. Felicity Savage King, who emphasized importance of breastfeeding not only for health benefits, but also on a nation's development. High-level policymakers from various ministries, including Health, People's Welfare Coordination, and National Development Planning, participated in the discussion.

The recent reports of severely malnourished children in NTB, NTT and other parts of Indonesia have reinstated malnutrition as a national concern. The responses have been abundant, but none have pointed to the impact of breastfeeding on preventing malnutrition and saving the lives of Indonesia infants. For example, the most recent nutrition survey of August-September 2005² showed that 8.9% of Acehnese children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, and 53% of these children are under the age of two. Children are most vulnerable to malnutrition during the first two years of life, and they can be protected from malnutrition and infections by exclusive breastfeeding from birth until six months, followed by appropriate complementary feeding and continued breastfeeding until age two.

In a review of data from 42 countries³, exclusive breast feeding has shown to be the public health measure with highest impact (13%) on infant and child mortality, compared to other high impact measures, including insecticide treated materials (7%), complementary feeding (6%), water and sanitation (3%), vitamin A (2%), and measles vaccination (1%).

In Indonesia, only 40% mothers are exclusively breastfeeding their infants until six months⁴. On average, Indonesian infants are only breastfed exclusively for less than two months. The challenges to breastfeeding include lack of knowledge among the mothers on the benefits of breastfeeding and how to do it, inadequate lactation counseling services and support from health professionals, socio-cultural perceptions against breastfeeding, inadequate conditions for working mothers to breastfeed (maternity leave, space for breastfeeding or expressing milk), and last but not least the aggressive marketing by infant formula companies that influence not only the mothers but also the health professionals

Breast milk is the perfect food babies and protects them from common childhood illnesses. Almost daily, scientists are discovering new ingredients in breastmilk that have important functions in the bodies of growing babies. Breastfed babies have better overall health than artificially-fed infants. In fact, scientists have documented breastfeeding protects against:

¹ Estimated using 219 million total population, Total Fertility Rate of 22 per 1000 live births, Under-five mortality rate of 46 per 1000 live births (Indonesia Demographic Health Survey 2002-3), and 13% under-five deaths that could be averted from exclusive breastfeeding (source noted in footnote 3).

² Conducted by Provincial Health Office NAD, Ministry of Health, SEAMEO and UNICEF, August – September 2005

³ Jones et al., The Lancet, July 2003: *Under-five deaths that could be prevented in 42 countries with 90% of worldwide child deaths in 2000 through universal coverage with individual interventions*

⁴ Indonesia Demographic Health Survey 2002-3

MEDIA RELEASE

diarrhea, lower respiratory infection, otitis media (middle ear infection), bacterial meningitis, botulism, urinary tract infection, sudden infant death syndrome, insulin-dependent diabetes, lymphoma, allergic diseases, chronic digestive diseases and obesity.

While formula companies try to add many nutrients to their formula, artificial milk is not a comparable substitute for breastmilk. Breastmilk is formulated for human babies while cow's milk (the main ingredient in infant formula) is formulated to meet the needs of growing cows. It is highly concentrated in protein and other building materials so that the baby cow will gain a lot of weight in a very short amount of time. In contrast, human milk is designed for optimal central nervous system growth in the first year, and slower physical growth. Thus, breastfed babies have higher IQs than their artificially-fed counterparts. In addition, most mothers in Indonesia do not have the capacity to prepare formula feeds hygienically, leading to much infection (especially diarrhea) in their babies. In fact, breastmilk is more affordable than infant formula.

Specific actions need to be taken to improve breastfeeding practices in Indonesia. The key policies are already in place. The Ministry of Health has a policy on exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding for two years with complementary feeding. They have also issued a decree to control marketing of breastmilk substitutes, which has been proposed to be upgraded to a government law. However, as exhibited by the ubiquitous advertising of infant formula in the mass media and even the health facilities, the enforcement of policies is weak. Immediate actions required include:

- Finalize, implement, monitor and evaluate the national policy on infant and young child feeding
- Allocate adequate human, financial, and organization resources for infant and young child feeding
- Motivate health professionals, facilities and organizations to set aside commercial interests, and train health staff on counseling skills for exclusive breastfeeding and optimum complementary feeding
- Ensure maternity facilities follow the "Ten steps to successful breastfeeding" and revitalize Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative
- Enforce the national code to control marketing of breastmilk substitutes and maternity protection legislation to protect the rights of working women

Under the new Country Programme of Cooperation with the Government of Indonesia (2006-2010), UNICEF is committed to support the Government and related NGO partners in implementing the above actions. Together with the Ministry of Health, UNICEF will chair a steering committee on Infant and Young Child Feeding to identify the needs, develop appropriate strategies, pool resources together and intensify efforts toward improved breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices in Indonesia. Some of the activities include support to the Ministry of Health to finalize the national strategy, revival of Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, training of health workers on breastfeeding counseling, and development of communications strategy.

Though policy makers and public health professionals in Indonesia are well aware of WHY breastfeeding is promoted, they are not well equipped with the necessary skills and resources on WHAT and HOW to ensure optimal breast feeding. "I hope that this workshop will establish political commitment and initiate momentum on a national movement to improve the lives of Indonesian infants with breastfeeding," said Dr. Meutia Hatta Swasono.

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