

Press Release - June 1, 2001

Science wins over trade at World Health Assembly, a historic Resolution passed

Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) and International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) South Asia, is pleased to share with you news of a recent development concerning infant feeding and child health that will have immense and far-reaching beneficial effect for society. A landmark Resolution that infants be exclusively breastfed for six months was passed at the World Health Assembly (WHA) on May 18, 2001 at Geneva issuing a firm call in support of exclusive breastfeeding of infants for first 6 months of age.

The new World Health Assembly Resolution , Infant and Young child nutrition, 54.2 in para. 2 (4) urges Member States to:

"to strengthen activities and develop new approaches to protect, promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months as a public health recommendation, taking into account the findings of the WHO expert consultation on optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding, and to provide safe and appropriate complementary foods, with continued breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond, emphasizing channels of social dissemination of these concepts in order to lead communities to adhere to these practices."

The Resolution also contains important protective clauses regarding baby food industry's promotional practices such as health claims and Internet advertising and addresses other issues such as human rights.

The Resolution settles a 7-year-old controversy over the two most critical aspects of infant feeding - the optimal duration for exclusive breastfeeding and the marketing of complementary foods for infants. Clarity on these issues will support policies aiming to improve infant health and decrease rates of mortality and morbidity globally.

Brazil, which is one of the 62 countries that already have a policy on exclusive breastfeeding for six months and led research into breastfeeding, put forward the resolution in May 2000 to the

WHA .As many as 50 member states of WHO and 7 International NGOs including International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) intervened in the debate in support of the call for 6 months' exclusive breastfeeding of infants. IBFAN and Save the Children Fund urged WHO to adopt an attitude of caution while dealing with the private sector in which many companies continue to undermine health in pursuit of profits. It is significant that this Resolution was passed on the eve of the 20th Anniversary of the adoption of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (The Code). Members of IBFAN from India and several countries were present in the WHA and strongly championed the cause for the adoption of the "6-month exclusive breastfeeding norm".

IBFAN had also presented at the WHA its latest report on violations of The Code – "Breaking the Rules 2001". This path- breaking report proved to be "eye opening" for many delegates. (see the evidence in Breaking the Rules 2001 www.ibfan.org).

Before the Assembly the International Association of Infant Food Manufacturers (IFM) wrote to member states in an attempt to weaken support for the Resolution. IFM is made up of some of the worst violators of the International Code and subsequent, relevant WHA Resolutions, including Nestlé, Wyeth, Numico (parent company of Nutricia, Milupa, Cow&Gate) and Hipp. Industrialized countries especially came under pressure from the baby food industry.

Dr. C. P. Thakur, Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, speaking in the beginning at the WHA spoke forcefully in favour of supporting the "6 months norm". At a press briefing upon his return to India, Dr. Thakur said that the technical advisory committee set up by the WHO last year had categorically recommended that exclusive breastfeeding should be allowed for a period of six months. However, companies manufacturing baby foods have been recommending on their labels that the minimum duration of exclusive breastfeeding should be four months. This was with a view to increase their sales. "We contended that the countries should not give in to pressure being exerted by baby food companies and backtrack from the recommendations made by their own experts," Dr Thakur said.

The Resolution has been widely acclaimed and welcomed by leading international and Indian experts on child health. Prof. Dr. Shanti Ghosh, (sghosh@del3.vsnl.net.in) a senior most pediatrician of the country ,advisor to the Govt. of India on Maternal and Child Health issues, called the resolution a welcome and landmark step towards the goal of health for all. She said,"

People tend to start complementary foods at a lower age when you give them an age range. All concerned parties within as well as outside the government should now harmonize their policies and disseminate it as widely as possible so that people and particularly professionals are not confused on this issue.”

Prof. Dr. R. K. Anand, (acashorg@vsnl.com) an authority on child health and infant nutrition, speaking to us from Mumbai, termed it as “the best and the sweetest news yet for the breastfeeding promotion movement in the world”. At the same time he felt a bit unhappy about the delay in having this Resolution due to unethical practices of infant formula manufactures lobbying for its delay. The delay, he said, has led to the suffering of many a children due to lack of exclusive breastfeeding during all those years. Last year IFM attempted to stop the Resolution from even being discussed at this Assembly.

Dr. Arun Gupta, (agupta@bpni.org) National Coordinator, BPNI, and South Asia Representative of IBFAN who was present at the WHA said “ I am very much pleased to see that accumulating evidence on the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding has at last led to a change in global policy and there is global agreement on this issue . The clear recommendations will allow people to achieve the best practice and any ambiguity with regard to the optimum duration of exclusive breastfeeding would have had an adverse impact on the breastfeeding promotion movement”.

It is hoped that the Infant Food Manufacturers (IFM), would comply with the International Code for Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes and subsequent relevant WHA Resolutions including this one, and the national legislations to that effect, in letter and spirit. IFM should stop marketing any complementary foods before the age of six months and also change the labels of breastmilk substitutes and infant foods.

We now call upon the policy makers, programme managers in the concerned Departments of the Governments, NGOs, International Organizations, Professional Associations, and all others concerned in India and South Asia, to take measures to effectively revise the national/state policy guidelines on infant feeding.

For more information, please contact

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International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) is a world wide network of over 150 public interest groups in over 90 countries working to improve the health and well-being of infants, young children, their mothers and families by promoting and supporting breastfeeding. IBFAN is the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award 1998.

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) is a registered, non-profit, independent national organization that works towards protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding, especially exclusive breastfeeding for first six months and optimal infant & young child nutrition. BPNI is a national network of individuals, groups, and NGOs. BPNI has international collaboration, and is the Regional Focal Point for South Asia for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) & Regional Coordination Center of International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) for South Asia. BPNI is registered under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and is notified NGO by the Government of India. BPNI does not accept funds or sponsorship of any kind from the companies producing infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles, related equipments, or infant foods (cereal foods).