

## Economic Studies

*Breastfeeding, one of women's unique contributions to society, is worth far more than any economic value assigned to it.*

Breastfeeding is "priceless." Advocacy of exclusive breastfeeding requires an appreciation of its full importance by all of society. Economic measurements cannot put a value on any expression of love or altruism. Most women view breastfeeding with pride.

However, placing human milk on food balance sheets could increase its perceived value (9). Seeing the real size of this contribution in terms of the food supply to a nation is impressive and demonstrates to responsible policy makers the importance of this activity in terms that they can more easily relate to.

### Breastmilk has economic value

In Norway it was calculated in 1992 that 8.2 million litres of breastmilk was produced, totalling US\$410 million when valued at \$50/litre based on what Norwegian hospitals pay for it. While the value of manufactured baby foods is included in the calculation of the gross national product (GNP), the value of breastmilk is not. This leads to the absurd conclusion that the GNP declines when breastfeeding rates increase! (10)

Annual breastmilk production has been estimated in several African countries to average 10 kg per capita (the range is from 8-17kg). Even if breastmilk is valued at only \$1/litre, the GNP would increase by 1% in Zimbabwe and 6% in Mali if it were included in GNP calculations (11).

The value of the breastmilk produced annually in Australia was calculated to be between A\$1.7 and A\$2.7 billion, depending on the valuation method used. If the Innocenti Declaration breastfeeding targets were achieved, the value of breastmilk would increase by another A\$3.4 billion, representing 3.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 40% of public expenditure on health (9).

### Breastfeeding promotion leads to health care savings

- ✓ For each baby breastfed for six months, the US government can save \$450-\$800 in welfare and health care costs (12).
- ✓ Illness attributable to artificial feeding in the USA costs \$291 million/year for infant diarrhoea; \$225 million for respiratory syncytial virus; \$660 million for otitis media, and \$10-125 million for insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM) (13).
- ✓ If the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding up to three months of age increased from 60-80% in Australia, A\$11.5 million would be saved on health care costs for otitis media, IDDM, gastrointestinal disease, and eczema alone (14).
- ✓ In India, if exclusive breastfeeding prevented only one episode of diarrhea per child per year, the money saved would exceed the national budget for child health. Lactation amenorrhea is by far the top contraceptive in the country; the value of this to the national family planning programme is equal to nearly half its budget (15).

## \$avings from Breastfeeding:

In Mexico, a hospital-based breastfeeding project cost only US \$4 per life saved, far less than other cost-effective interventions such as measles vaccine or oral rehydration therapy (16).

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In Iran, exclusive breastfeeding increased from 10% in 1991 to 53% in 1996. During that period, the cost of importing breastmilk substitutes declined by US\$50 million (17).

Australia would save A\$11.5 million on health care if exclusive breastfeeding up to 3 months of age increased from 60% to 80% (14).



Unfortunately, many countries provide free or subsidized milk powder to families with infants and this contributes to low breastfeeding rates. The US Women's Infants and Children (WIC) program spends twice as much per mother for infant formula as it does for the food given to women who breastfeed (13).