



WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK 2008

Going for the gold by supporting mothers to breastfeed

The World Health Organization (WHO) is pleased to join the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action in celebrating World Breastfeeding Week from 1 to 7 August 2008. This year's theme is "going for the gold by supporting mothers to breastfeed".

There is a double message here: it is not enough to say that breastfeeding is an ideal source of nourishment for infants and young children; mothers also need support to make optimal breastfeeding practices a reality. World Breastfeeding Week should focus our attention on investing in mothers and families, to give children the best start in life.

Breastfeeding, and in particular exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a child's life, ranks among the most effective interventions for improving child survival and health. While there are encouraging trends in breastfeeding rates in a few countries, global data show that less than 40 per cent of infants under six months of age are exclusively breastfed today. This underachievement in turn contributes to the unnecessary deaths of over a million children each year - lives that could be saved if mothers and families were adequately encouraged and supported to breastfeed.

Rapid improvements can be achieved if a breastfeeding culture once again permeates all levels of society. Mothers need support not only to begin breastfeeding within one hour of birth, but also to sustain exclusive breastfeeding for six months, and continue breastfeeding for two years or beyond, as well as giving other nutritious foods. They also need support to prevent and overcome breastfeeding difficulties and deal with competing demands on their time. In addition, governments must ensure that infant formula marketing never seeks to persuade mothers that products could possibly be equivalent to breast milk. Above all, mothers everywhere should have a sense of pride in breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding counselling, an important source of support for mothers, has been shown to improve breastfeeding practices. To this end, WHO has developed, together with UNICEF, a range of infant and young child feeding counselling courses and job aids for use by health care workers and lay counsellors.

Support for breastfeeding is needed not only from the health sector, but also within families, communities and the workplace, backed up by appropriate policies and legislation. The International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding are instruments to guide necessary actions. They call upon all concerned parties to play their role.

WHO fully supports scaling-up support for mothers everywhere to achieve the gold standard in infant feeding. With breastfeeding, everyone wins!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "M. Chan".

Dr Margaret Chan
Director-General