

# **Statement on Breastfeeding Week by the MEC for Health, Dr S Dhlomo**

10 August 2010

During World Breastfeeding Week, celebrated from 1 to 7 August we want to reiterate our call on mothers, care givers, fathers, families, health care workers and society that every infant and child has the right to good nutrition according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Secondly, that exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months has many benefits for the infant and the mother. Chief among these is protection against infections.

In commemoration of this year's Breastfeeding week, we want to call on all mothers to initiate breastfeeding early, within one hour of birth, to protect the newborn from acquiring infections and reduce newborn mortality. The risk of mortality due to diarrhoea and other infections can increase in infants who are either partially breastfed or not breastfed at all.

Malnutrition is responsible for one-third of infant deaths annually among children under five (according to WHO, 2009). It can be a direct cause of death but is also the most important single risk factor for disease in young children. Over two thirds of these deaths, which are often associated with inappropriate feeding practices such as bottle-feeding or untimely and inadequate complementary foods, occur during the first months of life.

Breast milk is an important source of energy and nutrients in children 6 to 23 months of age. It can provide one half or more of a child's energy needs between 6 and 12 months of age, and one third of energy needs between 12 and 24 months. Breast milk is also a critical source of energy and nutrients during illness and reduces mortality among children who are malnourished.

Adults who were breastfed as babies often have lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, as well as lower rates of overweight, obesity and type-2 diabetes. Breastfeeding also contributes to the health and well-being of mothers; it reduces the risk of ovarian and breast cancer and helps to space pregnancies - exclusive breastfeeding of babies under six months has a hormonal effect which often induces a lack of menstruation. This is a natural method of birth control known as the Lactation Amenorrhoea Method.

Breastfeeding, and especially early and exclusive breastfeeding, is one of the most significant ways to improve infant survival rates. There is evidence on HIV and infant feeding showing that giving antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) to either the HIV-infected mother or the HIV-exposed infant can significantly reduce the risk of transmitting HIV through breastfeeding. This enables HIV-infected mothers to breastfeed with a low risk of transmission (1-2%). These mothers can therefore offer their infants the same protection against the most common causes of child mortality and the benefits associated with breastfeeding.

All mothers are advised to exclusively breastfeed in the first six months of life and continue breastfeeding thereafter. Replacement feeding is not recommended, HIV positive mothers are offered ARVs which significantly reduce the risk of transmission.

Our message to mothers and families is;

**"Nothing beats mother's milk – exclusively breastfeed from the first hour after birth until 6 months!"**

Everyone has the right to information about the benefits of breastfeeding and the risks of artificial feeding. We, in government, have a responsibility to provide this information. Communities as well as media and other channels of communication can play a key role in promoting breastfeeding.

## **Key Messages: What every family and community has a right to know**

- Breast milk alone is the best food and drink for an infant for the first six months of life.
- Newborn babies should be given to the mother to hold immediately after delivery. They should have skin-to-skin contact with the mother and begin breastfeeding within one hour of birth.

- Almost every mother can breastfeed successfully. Breastfeeding the baby frequently causes production of more milk. The baby should breastfeed at least eight times daily, day and night, and on demand.
- Breastfeeding helps protect babies and young children against dangerous illnesses. It also creates a special bond between mother and child.
- Bottle feeding and giving a baby breast milk substitutes such as infant formula or animal milk can threaten the baby's health and survival. If a woman cannot breastfeed for health or social reasons a quality milk substitute from an ordinary clean cup.
- If a woman is infected with HIV, there is minimal risk that she can pass the infection to her infant through breastfeeding, if she is on antiretroviral therapy (ARV). It is recommended that the baby receives breast milk alone for the first six months, unless it is acceptable, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe to give breast milk substitutes (infant formula) exclusively.
- A woman employed away from her home can continue to breastfeed her child. She should breastfeed as often as possible when she is with the infant and express her breast milk when they are apart so that another caregiver can feed it to the baby in a clean and safe way.
- After 6 months of age, when babies begin to eat foods, breastfeeding should continue for up to two years and beyond because it is an important source of nutrition, energy and protection from illness.

We have adopted guidelines that aim to protect, promote and support appropriate infant and young child feeding. These guidelines are a framework through which the department will prioritize education, information and communication work in the area of infant and young child feeding, and provides technical support to health facilities and health care workers to facilitate implementation. We are going to train health care workers to provide skilled support to breastfeeding mothers and help them overcome problems. Basic breastfeeding support skills are also part of the guidelines.

Thank you!