WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK
AUGUST 1-7, 2015

CALL TO ACTION

EXPANDING ACCESS TO BREASTMILK:
BANKING ON OUR MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE FOR BABIES

Human milk is one of our planet’s most precious resources with the potential to prevent more than 800,000 deaths of children under five every year; more than 500,000 of them newborns in the first month of life.¹ No single vaccine or medicine has the life-saving power of human milk.

According to the World Health Organization, mothers’ own milk is the preferred option for all babies, but when mothers cannot provide their own milk, donor milk is the preferred option.² This is particularly important for babies born prematurely, with low birth weight or other conditions who cannot breastfeed, as they are more vulnerable to sickness and death. Providing donor breast milk to these babies can save newborn lives, improve newborn health and development and improve overall breastfeeding rates.

Human milk banks enable mothers to donate their extra breastmilk to special facilities where it is tested, treated and distributed to vulnerable newborns who don’t otherwise have access to their own mother’s milk. Experience in countries like Brazil, which has the world’s largest network of human milk banks, shows that integrating human milk banking into newborn care, breastfeeding promotion and Kangaroo Mother Care can contribute to significant reductions in newborn deaths and increases in breastfeeding.

With the imminent launch of the new Sustainable Development Goal to end preventable newborn and child deaths by 2030 and the unprecedented levels of financing now available to improve the nutritional status of children,³ increasing access to human milk banking and its integration with breastfeeding and newborn care programs, is both an imperative and an opportunity.

Accordingly, we the undersigned call upon all governments, the United Nations and its agencies, civil society and business leaders and all institutions with a stake in healthier generations of children, to commit to ensuring that all newborns have access to human milk by increasing investments in human milk banks as part of integrated breastfeeding, newborn care and infant nutrition programs, with a special focus on the countries where newborn deaths are concentrated.⁴

Specifically, we call for, over the life of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030):

1. the establishment of national government policies supporting human milk banks as an important element of best-practice breastfeeding, infant and child feeding, nutrition and newborn care plans and programs;

2. the development of global, national, and/or sub-national where appropriate, guidelines for the operation of human milk banks⁵;

3. increased public and private sector financing of programs that integrate human milk banks into existing breastfeeding, infant and child feeding, nutrition and newborn care programs, including campaigns that encourage, empower and champion mothers to donate breastmilk and establish a vibrant, breastfeeding culture;

4. collection and publication of data measuring the cost-effectiveness of human milk banking and the impact on newborn and child health and development; and

5. increased public and private investment in new technologies and innovations that improve human milk bank operation (e.g. more cost-efficient and effective pasteurization and rapid diagnostic techniques, breast pumps and human milk storage) and growth (e.g. larger reach for donation and improved ease of donation).

¹ Lancet, Maternal and Child Nutrition Series, 2013
² WHO, Guidelines on Feeding of Low Birth-Weight Infants in Low and Middle-Income Countries
³ The Global Financing Facility, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Nutrition Strategy, The Power of Nutrition Fund, and UNITLIFE
⁴ 70% of newborn deaths are in 15 countries including India, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Angola, Kenya, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Sudan, Uganda and the Philippines
What Does Human Milk Bank Success Look Like?

Brazil has the largest network of human milk banks in the world - more than 200 - as part of a national campaign to protect, promote and support breastfeeding.

More than 150,000 Brazilian mothers donate their breastmilk supported by toll free hotlines, home visits by lactation experts to help pump, sterilize and store breastmilk, and home pick-up of breastmilk. There is even a National Day of Human Milk Donation on May 19th of each year with a celebrity spokesperson.

After the milk is collected, tested, sorted and pasteurized, it is distributed mostly to NICU units in hospitals for premature and sick babies, as well as for babies whose mothers are not able to provide milk, for whatever reason.

One of the architects of the program, Dr João Aprigio Guerra de Almeida says: “For a small investment, we’re getting a huge return. We get better survival rates and overall health for babies that end up saving the health system money, and we get to reach out not only to mothers of premature babies, but to all new mothers and teach them about breastfeeding.”

This national mobilization has resulted in large increases in breastmilk donors and in breastfeeding rates. Now, more than half of Brazilian mothers are exclusively breastfeeding their babies at six months leading UNICEF to conclude that the Brazilian human milk banks are “giving the highest return rate of any bank in the world – helping to reduce mortality among premature babies”.

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