

OVERVIEW

Being properly fed since the first years of life, particularly the first months after birth, is extremely important for survival, growth and comprehensive development of each individual in latter life.

Today, child malnutrition is still very prevalent in the world, particularly in developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that annually there have been 10.9 millions of child deaths, among which 60% have been affected directly and indirectly by malnutrition.

In Vietnam, although great efforts have been made in controlling malnutrition for many years but the prevalence of malnutrition is still high. Presently, there are 3 millions of under-five children who are stunted (low height for age) nationwide¹. Besides, overweight and obesity are emerging in a fast pace in big cities. One of the main causes of this situation is poor feeding practice. Hence changing feeding practice for infants and young children is an essential intervention of the child malnutrition control activities in Vietnam.

Infant and young child feeding (IYCF) is related to culture, practice, habit, education level and socio-economic status of family and community. IYCF practice firstly depends on knowledge and skills of mothers and other caregivers. In fact, it has been shown that even in a poor socio-economic situation, if the caregivers understood and practiced proper feeding, child malnutrition would be prevented. However, the socio-economic situation of family and community plays a considerable role since it is the basis to ensure adequate resources for childcare. A successful policy for IYCF needs to address those factors.

Children have the right of being fed and cared well. It has been confirmed in the International convention on children rights based on the principle of respect, protection, encouragement and facilitation of this right so that it would be enacted. In addition, the mothers have the right to access an appropriate diet, and to choose an optimal feeding option for their own children. To do so, the mothers need to be provided comprehensive and updated information as well as to live in a most favorable environment that enables them to practice what they have chosen for IYCF

The socio-economic development and urbanization process, which have been occurred in many countries including Vietnam, are creating new challenges for IYCF. Under the pressure of work and income, the women have to work too much, thus having no time and condition to take care their children, while breast milk substitutes are quite available and widely advertised and marketed. This situation results in wrong feeding practices, which negatively influence infant and young child health. In addition, the increasing of HIV/AIDS epidemic, with a high-risk of mother-to-child transmission, and socio-economic changes and disparity have posed new problems to be addressed, i.e. "infant and young child feeding in exceptionally difficult circumstances".

¹ Annual nutrition surveillance report - NIN - 2003, 2004

The international community has been interested in IYCF for a long time. In 1981, the International Code of Producing and Marketing of breast-milk substitutes was issued. In 1990, the Innocenti Declaration on Protection, Promotion and Support of breastfeeding was in force. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative was introduced in 1991. This means that the IYCF is of globally significant importance. In 2002, WHO and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have ratified and disseminated the Global Strategy on IYCF. This is a great effort of all WHO's member countries, international and inter-governmental agencies... to achieve the right approach to eradicating nutrition-related burden (From 50 to 70% of disease burden such as diarrhea, measles, malaria and respiratory infection in childhood are possibly related to malnutrition) for the world children and to contributing to sustainable reduction of poverty. The Global Strategy on IYCF is developed on the basis of scientific evidences of the role of nutrition in the first months and years of life, as well as of the significance of proper feeding in achieving the best health outcomes. This strategy has confirmed the great effort of international community in reinforcing the commitment of different government in ensuring the best development for children through appropriate actions following the International Code of producing and marketing of breast-milk substitutes, the Innocenti Declaration on protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding, and the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative.

In Vietnam, developing the strategy and plan of action for IYCF is an urgent demand, thus creating a good, appropriate and safe nutrition environment for health improvement and optimal growth of Vietnamese children in current socio-economic conditions. In the past years, Vietnamese government has made a great effort in caring for the comprehensive development of children, including infant and young child feeding. The implementation of the Law on childcare and protection has obtained considerable achievements. The Government has approved the Strategy on People's Health Care and Protection, the National Nutrition Strategy 2001-2010, and the National Strategy for Reproductive Health, whose objectives and approaches are related to child feeding. However, it is necessary to have synchronous solutions on IYCF that specify and clarify the above Strategies, as well as integrate and unite activities and interventions, thus contributing to the achievement of the defined objectives of comprehensive health improvement and optimal growth for children, providing a human resource of high quality in the future, and ensuring the success of the industrialization and modernization process of the country.