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WHO/UNICEF MEETING ON INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING

Urgent action to promote the health and nutrition of infants and young children by governments, international agencies, non-governmental organizations and the infant-food industry was called for by the WHO/UNICEF meeting on infant and young child feeding which met at the Geneva headquarters of the World Health Organization (WHO) from 9 to 12 October 1979.

The full texts of the Statement and Recommendations approved by the Meeting are on the following pages.

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STATEMENT ON INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING

The joint WHO/UNICEF Meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding, which was held at WHO in Geneva from 9 to 12 October 1979, in expressing the need for urgent action by governments, international agencies, nongovernmental organizations and the infant-food industry and health and development workers to promote the health and nutrition of infants and young children, made the following statement:

1. Poor infant-feeding practices and their consequences are one of the world's major problems and a serious obstacle to social and economic development. Being to a great extent a man-made problem it must be considered a reproach to our science and technology and our social and economic structures, and a blot on our so-called development achievements. It is not only a problem of the developing world: it occurs in many parts of the developed world as well.
2. The question of adequate nutrition for mankind has been exercising international and national bodies for the last three decades, but the problem of malnutrition is not becoming less. It is taking a heavy toll in deaths and in long-term mental and physical disability. Women, with infants and young children, are its chief sufferers. This is socially, economically and politically unacceptable.
3. In this International Year of the Child, national governments and the international community are being called upon to focus on this complex problem and to take steps to ensure that children everywhere get a proper start in life on the basis of, inter alia, adequate nutrition. Governments and local communities have a major role to play in supporting action aimed at mothers and children to ensure sound infant and young child feeding practices.
4. Malnutrition in infants and young children cannot be separated from malnutrition and poor health in women. The mother and her infant form a biological unit; they share also the problems of malnutrition and ill-health, and whatever is done to solve these problems must concern them both together.
5. The problem is part of the wider issues of poverty, lack of resources, social injustice and ecological degradation; it cannot be considered apart from social and economic development and the need for a new international economic order. It is also a basic issue for health care systems and its solution must be seen in the context of Health for All by the Year 2000.
6. The WHO/UNICEF Meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding affirms the right of every child and every pregnant and lactating mother to be adequately nourished as a means of attaining and maintaining physical and psychological health. It stresses the responsibility of every society to ensure the effective enjoyment of this right so that children may develop to their full potential.
7. Breastfeeding is an integral part of the reproductive process, the natural and ideal way of feeding the infant and a unique biological and emotional basis for child development. This, together with its other important effects, on the prevention of infections, on the health and well-being of the mother, on child spacing, on family health, on family and national economics, and on food production, makes it a key aspect of self-reliance, primary health care and current development approaches. It is therefore a responsibility of society to promote breastfeeding and to protect pregnant and lactating mothers from any influence that could disrupt it.
8. The period of weaning from the breast is a critical stage which often results in malnutrition and disease if the child does not have a diet that is adequate in quantity and quality, hygienically prepared and culturally, socially and economically acceptable.
9. The health of infants and young children cannot be isolated from the status of women and their roles as mothers and as partners in social and economic development. In poor urban and rural communities where the health and socioeconomic status of women is deteriorating, a corresponding deterioration is taking place in the health of infants and young children.

10. Health for all cannot be attained unless there is a substantial improvement in the socio-economic condition of women, the particular needs of mothers and their infants and young children are recognized and met, and conditions are provided that promote and sustain the well-being of the family. These conditions include the right of women to information and education that will enable them to improve their own health and that of their families and to take an active part in decision-making on matters that affect their own and their children's health. They include also attention to the role of fathers in providing for the needs of their family.

11. The production, preservation, processing and distribution of food are essential components of any approach to ensuring the proper feeding of families and children. Emphasis should be placed on fresh local foods and traditional practices, complemented only when necessary, and under the guidance of government, by industrially processed products.

12. The WHO/UNICEF Meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding affirms the need for sustained national and international action, and for the active participation of families, and especially mothers, in the elimination of malnutrition and the promotion of health. This is a challenge to all social and economic development strategies and to the world community as a whole. In the International Year of the Child it is fitting that national and international efforts be intensified, and that the enthusiasm it has generated in the cause of child health be sustained, to respond to this challenge.

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