

## **BREASTFEEDING: THE 1<sup>ST</sup> HOUR**

### **SAVE ONE MILLION BABIES**

The first week of August is celebrated as ‘World Breastfeeding Week’ with an objective of focusing the attention on some important aspect of breastfeeding. This year’s theme emphasises the importance of initiating breastfeeding early (within an hour of birth)

Scientific research has shown that every year around 25 lakh under-fives die in India and malnutrition is directly or indirectly responsible for about half of them. Exclusive breastfeeding alone can save 13% of these deaths. It is estimated that initiating breastfeeding within an hour can save one million (10 lakh) babies every year.

Where do we stand in implementing this simple life saving measure? The recent (2005-2006) National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) reports the national early breastfeeding rate (EBR) as 23.4% while for Gujarat, it is only marginally better (27.1%). In the cultural capital of Gujarat (Vadodara) it is 55.1%. In contrast, Oman is reported to have an EBR of 84.8%! We have a long way to go.

In Vadodara:

86% deliveries are institutional

80% mothers are literate

6.1% only have 3 or less antenatal visits but

30% are not informed about breastfeeding

It is obvious that the maternity services have an important role to play in early initiation of breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding promotion needs four ‘C’s – Conviction, Commitment, Confidence and Counselling skills. All these are gained by training and practice.

Way back in 1989, the WHO/UNICEF joint statement listed 10 steps for promoting, protecting and supporting breastfeeding. Two of these are very relevant to early initiation of breastfeeding: ‘train all health care staff in the necessary skills’ and ‘inform all mothers (and the elders in the family) the benefits and management of breastfeeding.

The health providers are only next to the elders in the family in guiding infant and young child feeding practices. It is time that educational institutions and maternity hospitals have an ongoing programme for training the health care staff at all levels – the traditional birth attendants, health workers, nurses and doctors and to ensure that counselling about breastfeeding is an integral part of antenatal care.

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(References if needed may be sought from the author)