

The Code and HIV/AIDS

About 5-20 percent of HIV-infected mothers might pass the virus to their infants through breastfeeding. If a mother exclusively breastfeeds the risk may be smaller. Exclusion of all breastfeeding eliminates the risk, but where HIV infection rates are high, conditions of poverty can make death from artificial feeding a greater risk than that of contracting HIV. An HIV-infected mother has the right to make an informed decision as to how she feeds her baby. She needs emotional support and unbiased information that she understands.

The UN Guidelines state that:

“When replacement feeding is acceptable, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe (AFASS), avoidance of all breastfeeding is recommended. Otherwise exclusive breastfeeding is recommended during the first months of life.”

The UN Guidelines on HIV and Infant Feeding stress the importance of the Code in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The use of artificial feeding by HIV-infected mothers may send a message into the wider community that artificial feeding is endorsed by health professionals and carries no risk. This effect is called ‘spillover’. If the Code is fully implemented and all promotional messages banned, health professionals and others will find it easier to convey information and support for infant feeding decisions in the context of HIV/AIDS. Full Code compliance can help prevent ‘spillover’.

“It is time for leaders and civil society to protect mothers and children in Africa, and indeed the whole world, from the marketing schemes of transnational corporations. Code implementation is a noble target for a better future.”

Félicité Tchbindat, Nutrition Officer, UNICEF Tanzania, 2006

Raising Code awareness

Our delegates at the World Health Assemblies know that concerned citizens are the key to progress. We all can make a big difference to society’s health through raising Code Awareness. Remember:

- Raising Code awareness need not be confrontational. Though companies may flout the Code deliberately, many individuals do so because they know nothing about it. It does not help to antagonise them if they have been breaking the Code. They need education not criticism.
- No one wants babies to die or mothers to suffer. When they learn and understand how promotion harms, good people always want to find a way to change practices.
- Share your information about the Code to help improve practices and rejoice if other people ‘borrow’ your ideas.
- Work together, you cannot do this alone.
- Your creativity is special; you will have the best ideas for your local situation.

ACTION IDEAS FOR CODE PROGRESS

Educating ourselves and others

- Set up Code-training sessions with colleagues and allies. Contact IBFAN, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) or World Health Organization (WHO) (either locally or internationally) and request materials, information and advice. (See page 6 for contact addresses).
- Request UNICEF and WHO for copies of free key documents.
- Offer to provide Code awareness training sessions for your local health facilities. If they are aiming to gain or maintain Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative status, they need to know the Code.

Monitoring

- Carry out a monitoring exercise. Visit supermarkets and pharmacies. Check magazines and other print media, the web, TV and radio. If possible, look at your local health facilities whether state or private.
- Prepare a simple monitoring report with clear facts and figures and actual or photographic evidence of Code violations. Protect confidentiality at all times.
- Encourage students to do Code monitoring and related topics for their research projects. Support them with information and contact addresses.

Communication and publicity

- Communicate with administrators, consumer and human rights group, health professionals and breastfeeding support groups to set up a Code Monitoring Committee (maybe local or national). This can be a working party within an existing Breastfeeding Committee.
- Prepare a simple presentation with examples of common Code violations to explain how they undermine good decision-making
- Prepare a simple press release for local media and choose the most articulate spokesperson to deal with journalists.
- Offer local video or film makers a topic outline to interest them in making a video/DVD/film that you could use for parents and health professionals. Student film makers may be eager to work at lowest cost to practice and prove their worth.
- If you have computer access, set up an email list for sending out Code facts and figures. Set up an internet chatline on local monitoring to share with others.



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead, Anthropologist.