



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the

**REGIONAL WORKSHOP FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF TO PROMOTE
BREASTFEEDING PRACTICES AS PART OF THE
IMCI COMMUNITY COMPONENT**

Rabat, Morocco, 8–9 July 2007

Your Excellency, Distinguished Participants, Dear Colleagues,

I am very pleased to be with you today to inaugurate this important event which is part of a series of similar efforts to improve child health in the Region. I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks to the Government of Morocco, for having kindly agreed to host this meeting and to the Ministry of Health for the excellent arrangements. Special gratitude goes to His Excellency Dr Mohammed Cheikh Biadillah Minister of Health of Morocco, for his kind agreement to inaugurate this meeting. I also welcome representatives of UNICEF, WHO headquarters and country staff.

Dear Colleagues,

I welcome this gathering of scientists and public health managers for whom child health is a key focus and concern. The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is undertaking a number of initiatives to improve child health in the Region, recognizing the special position that they occupy in our countries. Ours is a young region in terms of age of its population: caring for our future means investing in children's health.

While research, technology and clinical interventions help to advance child health science, there are simple and effective public health interventions which, when implemented on a large scale, can have significant impact on child health. Among such interventions the promotion of good breastfeeding practices stands out as one of the most important approaches for improving child health.

The peculiar composition of breastmilk, in addition to the other psychosocial effects of breastfeeding, is very well known to all of us. A large and ever increasing number of studies have proved the value and importance of breastfeeding on child and maternal health. Early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding have been identified as among the most effective interventions – for which there is strong evidence – to reduce neonatal mortality. There is overwhelming epidemiological evidence that, even in developed countries, breastfeeding protects against gastrointestinal and, to a lesser extent, respiratory infections. Any breastfeeding is associated with a greater than two-fold protection against infant mortality compared with no breastfeeding and such a protection, is active also in the second year of life. Exclusive breastfeeding offers the most protection and partial breastfeeding offers intermediate protection against morbidity and mortality from infectious diseases, when compared with no breastfeeding. Infants under 6 months of age who are not breastfed are estimated to have a greater than 5-fold increased risk of morbidity and mortality from diarrhoea and pneumonia compared to infants who are exclusively breastfed. Scientific reviews have estimated that increasing optimal breastfeeding practices, particularly exclusive breastfeeding, could save the lives of 1.5 million children in the world every year.

But the benefits of breastfeeding go beyond illness and death. Research has suggested a positive association between breastfeeding and psychological development of children, and the achievement of higher scores for cognitive development and performance in intelligence tests among children who have been breastfed compared with those who have not. Finally, breastfeeding also lays the foundation for future health: systematic reviews and meta-analysis of studies have provided evidence of the long-term effects of breastfeeding, extending into adult life, by reducing the risk of developing conditions such as overweight and obesity, type-2 diabetes, hypertension and other heart-related problems.

In 2001, the World Health Assembly, in resolution WHA54.2, recommended exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months—as a global public health policy—and continuation of breastfeeding for up to 2 years. However, despite the social and religious background of our Member States, infant and young child feeding indicators, particularly exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices, are unacceptably low in our Region, in countries with both high and low socioeconomic and health indicators.

The Regional Office has recognized the role of different categories of influential people and opinion leaders in bringing about and supporting change in community health-related behaviour. University staff are among them. Leading academics, teaching professionals and scientists can influence, not only students' future practices but also the community in general. You occupy a very special place in society and enjoy people's trust and respect. A university professor has responsibilities that go beyond teaching. Through teaching you are not only transferring knowledge and clinical skills to future generations of doctors. You are also inspiring and shaping the behaviour and attitudes of tomorrow's physicians and, through them, community child health care practices, the ultimate challenging test of your work. It is a noble, moral mandate for which the community will always remain grateful to you.

The Regional Office has been organizing a series of meetings addressing different cadres of influential people. Just a month ago, we brought together eminent religious leaders and child health programme managers to review their key role in breastfeeding promotion. The main objective of this workshop is to agree together on how we can collaborate—universities, ministries of health and WHO—to promote breastfeeding practices in our Region. The outcome of this workshop will also show a good model for partnership and joint work for child health, as already seen in IMCI pre-service education.

Distinguished guests and colleagues,

I would like to thank you all for participating in this workshop. I am confident that you will develop action-oriented plans which can help make a difference, contributing to healthier lives for children. Breastfeeding is a child's right, to which countries have committed themselves, and we all have an obligation to promote it. I look forward to a successful outcome of your meeting and wish you a pleasant stay in Rabat with the kind hospitality of the Moroccan people.