

From the Yemen Observer

Five health practices can save babies' and mothers' lives

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Jul 1, 2008

A training workshop was conducted by the Basic Health Services Project (BHS) during June 22-26 to train more than 20 doctors and midwives on the best five health practices that can help Yemeni women and their babies to survive childbirth and reduce their high mortality rates. The workshop included participants from five different governorates: Aden, Lahjj, Ibb, Taiz, and Amran.

The workshop also trained doctors and midwives to become trainers to help thousands of mothers in the different Yemeni governorates. Their experience can reassure mothers, especially new ones, and give them the knowledge to understand how these five practices work.

The workshop is based on realizing the difference between the present practices and what we seek to apply as the best ones, that is, the five practices which chiefly depend on people who work for the health services” said Ahmed al-Salahi, a technical and training officer in the BHS project, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

“We observe that the mortality of mothers and new born babies, especially those aged one month, cannot be reduced as required and is still high. Since 1990, infant mortality rate has ranged between 37 to 38 deaths per 1,000 live babies. This means that there has not been any great change in terms of reducing the rate of death among new born babies during the last 18 years,” al-Salahi said. “These practices are not new in terms of learning, but we aimed to strengthen how they can be applied and practiced,” he explained.

Breast milk is an irreplaceable gift a mother can give to her baby. It is the beginning of life that nature intended a baby to have. Breastfeeding is the first practice and the most effective natural choice for infant’s health as well as the mother’s, especially if the baby is put on their mother’s breast to suck during the first hour of life.

Mothers should know why breastfeeding is important and how to keep on practicing it, without giving the baby any other kinds of food, liquids or even water. They should also know that the baby should be breastfed once every two or three hours during the whole day for at least the first six months of life.

Non-breastfed babies have a higher risk of cot death and have an increased likelihood of allergy. They are also more likely to fall ill, costing more to the family and the community in medical bills. Moreover, they are less “environmentally friendly” - in terms of fuel, energy and resources needed for artificial feeding.

Breastfeeding also helps the mother’s body return to its pre-pregnant state more quickly. Many women also find they lose their extra weight while breastfeeding. Women who have not breastfed their babies have an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer, heart disease and osteoporosis. Breastfeeding’s contraceptive effect can delay the return of fertility in many women, who exclusively breastfeed their babies of less than six months of age.

Strategies to improve reproductive healthcare for women after pregnancy should become a higher priority. That is how family planning after delivery becomes the second most important practice, crucial in protecting mother and baby from the expected hazards of being pregnant in a short period after giving birth. The mother is advised to wait until her baby is at least 2 years old before she tries to become pregnant again, which is best for the baby and good for the mother too. There are various effective ways to delay pregnancy and help mothers to have a good health and good social conditions for their babies.

A healthy baby is a happy baby. However, the World Health Organization shows that infection has led one third of new-born babies worldwide to die. The unclean environment and the health workers' poor practices often lead babies to being infected with diseases. By consequence it is crucial that people working in health facilities as well as family members realize this third practice: to learn how to protect babies from being infected with diseases and how to follow the right practices in cleanliness and sterilization.

Vitamin A shortage is one of the most spread public health problems among women and babies. It has been proven that giving a big supply of this vitamin to women after delivery can improve her health as well as her baby's. It can also increase the quantity of vitamin A in the mother's body and thus in her breast milk. The BHS project plans to apply this fourth practice, providing every woman with one capsule of vitamin A either in the delivery unit, before leaving hospital, or when visiting the hospital if she gives birth to her baby somewhere else.

This means that the capsule will work to keep a good quantity of vitamin A stored in the mother's body in order to protect the breastfed baby from this vitamin's shortage. For babies, their mothers' breast milk is the only and most important source of vitamin A since most of them are born with a very limited level of this vitamin.

"These practices will begin to be applied in the Al-Sabeen Hospital for maternity and childhood, to be then applied in hospitals in the other chosen governorates. But, we also seek to expand this project to include all the Yemeni governorates," said Ahmed Shamsan, a pediatrician in the Al-Sabeen Hospital and a trainer during the workshop held in Sana'a.

Low Birth Weight babies (LBW babies) are born already too weak, prone to various diseases and unable to acclimatize to the new environment. It has been also proved that LBW babies need to be directly stuck to the mother's body for different periods, depending on the baby's case, as a strong and effective practice to keep the baby body's temperature and to help his breastfeeding.

"Such practices are very simple to apply, especially in developing countries, because they do not have any cost while their effect in reducing the mortality of mothers and infants are great," said Arwa Shaker, a gynecologist in the Al-Wehda Hospital, Aden.

The five health practices were chosen in a conference that focused on discussing the best health practices for mothers and new born babies. A Yemeni team also participated in the conference which was conducted by the Extending Service Delivery (ESD) Project, supported by USAID, in Bangkok, in September 2007.