

EXPERT CONSULTATION ON THE OPTIMAL DURATION OF EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING

The Process, Recommendations, and Challenges for the Future

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1. ABSTRACT

In March, 2001 The World Health Organization (WHO) convened an Expert Consultation to recommend to WHO an optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding. WHO formulated the specific questions to be addressed, selected the membership for the meeting, prepared background documents, and provided the venue for the meeting. After the meeting WHO formally accepted the recommendations and began to implement them.

The Consultation recommended that WHO change its recommendation on exclusive breastfeeding from four-to-six months to a recommendation to promote exclusive breastfeeding for six months. This recommendation was contingent upon WHO also accepting and implementing other recommendations to deal with possible detrimental side effects, and to support mothers who did not exclusively breastfeed for six months.

The amount of scientific evidence available was more than is often available for policy decisions in health, but much less than desirable to address issues of generalizability across and within populations. The evidence for the contingent recommendations was also less than desirable and raises a number of important research questions that now need to be addressed.

2. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) was concerned that different United Nations agencies and different countries around the world were recommending two different durations of optimal exclusive breastfeeding. Some agencies recommended six months duration while WHO and other agencies recommended that complementary feeding be initiated between four and six months, thereby implying a duration of four months of

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exclusive breastfeeding. WHO did not believe that either of these recommendations had been subjected to careful scientific review and hoped that such a review would resolve the controversy.

To that end, an Expert Consultation was convened on March 28-30, 2001, at the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. Organized under the direction of Mercedes de Onis, of the Nutrition Unit, with the help of Jose Martines from the Child and Adolescent Health Division, the purpose of the consultation was to decide which of the two recommendations for optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding should be supported. The availability of two recommendations was a cause of confusion to health policy makers and providers.

Science is translated into public policy and action through various mechanisms. The mechanism of an expert consultation is one with which scientists tend to be comfortable, in part because it is more transparent and provides opportunities for significant input by scientists. This summary highlights features of the process, describes the conclusions, and considers the challenges that it presents for future research.

3. THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The first step was to specify the issue in the form of a mandate for the consultation. This was formulated as follows:

- (a) To review the scientific evidence on the optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding
- (b) To formulate recommendations for practice on optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding
- (c) To formulate recommendations for research needs in this area.

In preparation for the consultation a set of background papers was prepared, which included the following:

- (a) The optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding: a systematic review (Kramer & Kakuma 2002)
- (b) Nutrient adequacy of exclusive breastfeeding for the term infant during the first six months of life (Butte et al. 2002)
- (c) Description of worldwide exclusive breastfeeding practices by Mercedes De Onis (unpublished).

The first of these papers by Michael Kramer is included in this volume (Kramer & Kakuma 2004), although the annexes of the report are not. The information presented in the annexes (Kramer & Kakuma 2002) was particularly important in the deliberations of the consultation because the data are presented so fully that Kramer's conclusions in the report could be validated or challenged. Kramer's background paper went through a particularly exhaustive review process. It was sent widely to scientists who had been involved in research related to the duration of breastfeeding. Many of these scientists had strongly held views about the optimum duration of exclusive breastfeeding. Individuals submitted their reviews of the Kramer report, which were then shared with the participants to the consultation, and which he took into account in the final document.