



PRESS RELEASE:

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CELEBRATING WORLD AIDS DAY AND THE HOPE FOR AN HIV-FREE GENERATION

In 2010 we can celebrate the good news that it is possible for HIV positive mothers to give birth to babies who are HIV negative. And celebrate that a new generation is being born who can be protected from contracting the virus from their mothers.

Thanks to ARVs (antiretroviral drugs) – given to the mother during her pregnancy and to mother and infant after the birth – and the effects of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of the baby's life, the vast majority of children can escape infection from mother to child transmission of HIV.

In a recent study in Botswana, an amazing 99% of children were found to be HIV negative after a strict course of antiretroviral therapy was provided and mothers were counselled and supported to exclusively breastfeed their infants for the first six months of life.

In line with new World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, after this period of exclusive breastfeeding, mothers continued to breastfeed their infants while giving family foods up to the age of 12 months. At that time, mothers were advised that they should only stop breastfeeding once they were sure the baby was getting the right kinds of food to replace the highly nutritious Breastmilk.

GOVERNMENT POLITICAL WILL NEEDED

Results like those found in the Botswana study underline the need for governments to make serious efforts to ensure that the WHO guidelines are being followed so that all pregnant women and their unborn infants are given the best chance for survival.

This is at the core of the 2010 theme for World Aids Day – Universal Access and Human Rights. It is the right of the mother and child to receive the very best ARV treatment possible (access to treatment) and it is the right of the mother and child to be protected and supported during the breastfeeding period.

This cannot be achieved without the political will from governments. The WHO guidelines are intended to help governments put in place policies that will ensure that the necessary budgetary support is available, and ensure that sufficient healthworkers are trained to respond to the needs of mothers and infants.

“GREAT RISK AND HARM”

Research has shown that mothers cannot do it alone. Mothers need counselling, they need information, they need knowledge, they need to know that there is someone to turn to when they need support. Community support groups, family members and other non-professionals can do a great deal to support mothers but if health practitioners are not equipped to do their jobs, not

equipped to provide the right ARVs, counselling and support, then many babies will be exposed to great risk and harm.

If 2011 is to be another year of celebration, it is urgent that the WHO guidelines become a reality for the country and that exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life becomes the norm for all women, whether HIV positive or not. The health of the next generation is at stake but we have it in our power to make positive changes that can make an HIV-free generation a reality.

It is against this background that IBFAN Africa joins the world in not just commemorating World Aids Day but celebrating the role that breastfeeding can play in the fight against HIV. IBFAN encourages all pregnant women to find out their HIV status and encourages fathers and other family members and the wider community to support the breastfeeding mother.

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