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Breast-feeding cuts infants' deaths Mother's milk complete food for children: Experts

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ISLAMABAD - Attributing the alarming infant mortality rate in the country to the increasing trend of keeping infant on formula milk instead of mother's milk, speakers at a seminar stressed the need for creating mass awareness on the particular issue.

They were speaking at a preparatory and planning meeting of National Alliance for Promotion and Protection of Breast-feeding and other key stakeholders for joint celebrations of the upcoming World Breast-feeding Week (WBW). The seminar was organised by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection a non-profit organisation here on Tuesday.

Global Breast-feeding Week (WBW) is celebrated every year from August 1-7 in more than 120 countries to encourage breast-feeding and improve the health of babies around the world. It commemorates the innocent declaration made by WHO and UNICEF policy-makers in August 1990 to protect, promote and support breast-feeding.

The health experts, terming breast-feeding as a basic right of infants said, mothers' milk is a complete food for first six months.

Promotion of formula milk was linked to the decreasing breast-feeding practice one of which has resulted in high infant and neonatal mortality rate in Pakistan that is 77 out of 1,000.

Addressing the gathering, Waqar Ahmed, Executive Coordinator of TheNetwork, explained the aims and objectives of the meeting and emphasised the role of civil society in pressure building on government sector to notify the rules and regulation of Breast-feeding Ordinance 2002.

He asked for developing joint strategies for breast-feeding promotion and protection with

media and other stakeholders as health, education, and environment.

Commenting on the theme Sheeba Afghani, Communication Specialist of UNICEF, said theme of WBW 2009, "Breast-feeding - a vital emergency response. Are you ready?" highlights the need to protect, promote and support breast-feeding in emergencies situation for infant and young child survival, health and development. She opined that the awareness activities should be carried out at larger scale and those areas where hundreds of thousands Internally Displaced Persons have been accommodated should be focused.

Infants are among the most vulnerable groups during emergencies, owing to increased risk of death due to diarrhea and pneumonia. During emergencies, unsolicited or uncontrolled donations of breast-milk substitutes may undermine breast-feeding and should be avoided, Sheeba stated.

To achieve the objectives of the WBW Lady Health Workers should be mobilised for promotion of breast-feeding as they are the delivery agent at the household level, suggested Yaqoub Manzar Qureshi, Health Education Advisor, Nutrition Wing, Ministry of Health.

He said rules and regulations of breast-feeding ordinance is pending with the Ministry of Law and after its approval implementation phase would be addressed. Only eight percent infants at the age of 6 to 8 months are exclusively breastfed in Pakistan, informed Dr Siham Sikander from Human Development Research Foundation. "Low literacy rate, lack of awareness, cultural practices, psychological distress undermining capacity and poor implementation of breast-feeding ordinance are the main causes of low rate of exclusive breast-feeding", he continued.