BREAST FEEDING

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The paperback edition of *Breast Feeding: the Biological Option* is published at a specially low price as a result of a subsidy provided by the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development.

BREAST FEEDING

the Biological Option

G. J. EBRAHIM

Macmillan Education

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1978 978-0-333-23802-8

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First published 1978 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi Dublin
Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos Melbourne
New York Singapore and Tokyo

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ebrahim, G. J.

Breast feeding. — (Macmillan tropical community series).

1. Breast feeding

I. Title

649'.3 R J216

ISBN 978-0-333-23803-5 ISBN 978-1-349-15928-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-15928-4

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Preface

In the rural areas of the developing world, in urban slums and shanty towns infants who do not have access to their mothers' milk fail to thrive and even survive. Such communities constitute more than 80 per cent of the populations of the average developing country. And yet breast feeding has declined sharply in most such countries. The causes of this decline are several. Socio-economic development, rapid urbanisation, working mothers, have all been mentioned as possible causes. Yet they cannot be major causes because breast feeding is now making a come-back in many of the industrialised countries of the West where all these factors are present. In fact the two most outstanding causes of the decline of breast feeding are the high-pressure promotion of infant foods and the absence of a firm stand in favour of breast feeding by the health professions.

Breast feeding is only fleetingly mentioned during the training of most health workers. Many of the more popular textbooks assign only a small space to this aspect of child nutrition and rearing, with the result that the subject carries little intellectual appeal for the student. In recent years, however, a considerable amount of scientific research has helped to increase our knowledge of the nutritional and immunological properties of breast milk, and the biological importance of the mother's milk in the nurture of her offspring is better appreciated. One of the objectives of the book is to present some of these advances in a concise form in the hope that the subject will be taught and discussed more fully in the training programmes of the health and related professions.

When problems with breast feeding arise, intervention will be more successful if there is adequate understanding of the physiology of lactation and suckling. The first two chapters deal with these aspects of breast feeding.

As maternity services develop, more and more mothers will have their babies in hospitals, health centres and maternity units. When birth takes place at home in the traditional way, the birth attendant also helps with the establishment of breast feeding in accordance with the

cultural practices of the society. On the other hand, in the modern obstetric unit the physician, the nurse and the midwife may unwittingly interfere with the establishment of breast feeding on account of the traditional routines of the maternity ward. These are discussed in Chapter 3 and suggestions are made for the successful establishment of lactation in the lying-in ward, and its maintenance later.

A knowledge of the mechanisms of synthesis and secretion of the various constituents of breast milk is necessary to appreciate the importance of the mother's milk in the nutrition of the infant. Chapter 4 reviews some of the new information in this respect and contrasts it with the possible effects of feeding with commercial formulae. The book was never meant to enter the controversy of breast versus bottle. And yet it was felt that the artificial feeding of infants should be put in the correct historical context, leaving it to the reader (and the teacher) to make comparisons and draw conclusions in group discussions. Chapter 5 provides a short history of artificial feeding, and points out that whereas artificial feeding first became possible because of technological developments in the beginning of this century, it did not become widely established until after the Second World War. As such, it is no older than three decades compared to the millions of years of human evolution during which the milk evolved with the species.

The last chapter discusses some of the nutritional, social and economic consequences of artificial feeding in the Third World. The problems of each developing country are unique and in a book of this nature only generalisations are possible. It is the author's hope that Chapter 6 will lead to discussions on the special problems within each country.

Finally, a word of explanation about suggested reading at the end of each chapter. A large bibliography would certainly have given the book a more 'learned' appearance. For example, more than 200 references were studied for the review presented in Chapter 4. Instead, the author opted for a short list of books and review articles. In the medical libraries of many poor nations only a few journals are available so that a large list of references will have served little purpose. On the other hand, by identifying key texts and reviews the author hopes to bring them to the notice of the interested reader.

G. J. EBRAHIM

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