

# Breastfeeding Seminar

*Protecting, Promoting, and Supporting  
Breastfeeding in the Field*

May 9-11, 2017  
Washington, DC

DAY 3: Thursday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## NOTES FROM CLOSING REMARKS BY JUDY CANAHUATI

At the end of the seminar, after receiving an award from the community for being a Breastfeeding Champion, Judy Canahuati provided some closing remarks, mainly looking back at how far we had come since she first started thinking about breastfeeding as a high school student and where we are now. She recalled that the future of breastfeeding seemed so precarious during the late 1950s (when breastfeeding hit its low point in the US) that she and some of her fellow students mused about whether breasts would become vestigial organs, like the appendix! She thought that we had “come a long way” since then, but many of the issues are the same, confirming the saying *plus ça change* (“the more things change.....the more they stay the same”, attributed to Alphonse Karra, a French critic, journalist and novelist).

Instead of summarizing the sessions, which she thought Chessa Lutter had done remarkably well, she pulled out some highlights of the discussions for future consideration. She first noted Professor Daniel Sellen’s presentation, which highlighted that although the environmental context may have changed, the baby’s needs remain the same. Dr. Sellen also discussed the effectiveness of telephone counseling, which was actually the original La Leche League model and continues to be used by La Leche League. She noted how cell phones offer a technology that allows telephone counseling to be adapted to the current context and reach larger numbers of people than through face-to-face meetings.

A challenge in the modern context is that more women are working in the formal sector and in many places don’t have much or any real maternity leave. Many mothers start bottle feeding early to be sure that babies will take a bottle and give the babies formula because they don’t have knowledge of how to, or support for, milk expression. She recalled that even when mothers were not formally employed, as she noted in Honduras when she was working there, the workload for women was so heavy that they saw propping the bottle as freeing them up to do chores. The concept of putting formula in the bottle came from not understanding how to hand express or how long the milk would last. She reminisced about the relief felt by mothers who learned for the first time that they could express their milk when they had to leave their babies and that the milk would not immediately “spoil”.

Judy noted that many who worked with her in earlier years also think of her as a “Family Planning Champion”. She mentioned that one of the important advances of this latest period is the accumulated evidence that optimal breastfeeding does effect child spacing positively.

Other positive trends that she noted as causes for optimism include a greater focus on the Life Cycle approach, even in the emergency context. The 1000 days partnership, which extends focus on nutrition into pregnancy, is one manifestation. Recently there has been increasing interest in the pre-conception period as well. The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement is engaging a larger number of countries and policy makers in support of breastfeeding.

A recent return to a focus on nutrition and the integration of nutrition into development within USAID, as exemplified by the development of the Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy 2014-2025, is also a positive development along with its roll-out which includes emphasis on adolescent and maternal nutrition, along with infant and young child nutrition. She pointed to the importance as well of the revision of the ADS 212 breastfeeding policy originally developed in 2001 by Miriam Labbok and Kristen Marsh. [This policy has been revised to focus on wider issues of infant and young child nutrition including the period of complementary feeding. With leadership from GH Nutrition, this revised policy is almost ready for posting.](#)

Judy also noted some gaps, such as a continuing lack of clarity around the benefits of breastfeeding beyond the period of exclusive breastfeeding, and the need for a sharper focus on the importance of Kangaroo Mother Care and skin-to-skin contact in the early days of life. There is also the challenge of understanding the importance of “breastfeeding” and not just “breast milk” for the human baby. Additional challenges include how to scale up breastfeeding support in developing countries and she pointed out the relevance of the cellphone counseling model as presented by Professor Sellen. Judy suggested that the issue of sustainability ought to include looking at how to involve other sectors of the population who can be champions and pressure groups. Judy also highlighted the importance of including appropriate education about breastfeeding at all levels of the educational system from kindergarten to pre-service training of professionals. The latter would enable in-service training to focus on different issues and not constant retraining of new cohorts of health workers.

Finally, Judy summed up her years in breastfeeding support, promotion and protection with the hope that the advances made since La Leche League started in 1956, many of which were discussed in the seminar, would still be able to assist developing countries to escape the cycle of the “developed” countries experience of having sharp declines in breastfeeding before an upswing happens. That was her hope 40 years ago and she still has optimism that this may be possible.