

Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association
Submission to Panel on Constitutional Affairs on
Second Report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR)
under Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
18 March 2013

Concluding Observations in 2005

In the Concluding Observations of the report on China including Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee) in 2005, the UN Committee expressed concerns with “the persistence of malnutrition, emergence of child obesity and inadequate breastfeeding policies throughout the State party” and urged that policies and programmes should be developed to adequately address the problems and “to promote breastfeeding through strengthening the implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes” and specifically for HKSAR, “through the promotion of baby friendly hospitals.”

Obesity in Hong Kong

For unknown reasons, HKSAR’s second report gave statistics of malnutrition (wasting and stunting) which, rightly stated, is uncommon in Hong Kong, but omitted any statistics on the much more significant problem of obesity. In fact, according to the Student Health Service, the prevalence of overweight including obesity among primary school students rose from 16.4% in the 1997/98 school year to 21.4% in 2010/11, i.e. one in five children, a magnitude not to be ignored.

The Hong Kong Code

It is commendable that the Steering Committee on Prevention & Control of Non-Communicable Disease in 2010 endorsed the proposal of developing and implementing a code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes. Hence a “Hong Kong Code of Marketing and Quality of Formula Milk and Related Products, and Food Products for Infants & Young Children” (HK Code) has been drafted and the public consultation just completed in February 2013. Studies of the Department of Health have clearly shown the impact of marketing of formula milk for infants and young children in Hong Kong so that parents have an over-reliance on formula milk and bottle feeding for their

children well into kindergarten age with the resultant severe imbalance of the diet of young children. Unfortunately, the HK Code proposed is a voluntary Code and the level of compliance is uncertain. Meanwhile, as expected, the industry is mobilising its massive human and monetary resources to lobby against the HK Code. This is a crucial time for the government to demonstrate to the Hong Kong and international community that Hong Kong is upholding its commitment to the CRC, that every child has the right to “the highest attainable standard of health” and that in its balance of the rights of stakeholders, “the best interest of the child” is truly a “primary consideration” and not that of business concerns. To ensure the HK Code is enforceable, preparation of implementation through legislation should also go ahead without delay.

Baby Friendly Hospitals

Two decades after World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF launched the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative and eight years after the last hearing before the UN Committee, Hong Kong has yet to have an accredited Baby Friendly Hospital. It is good that a major obstacle to becoming a Baby Friendly Hospital, the acceptance of free supplies of breastmilk substitutes, has been removed since the hospitals under the Hospital Authority started purchasing such products in 2010 followed by private hospitals. Being an accredited Baby Friendly Hospital means the hospital has instituted good medical practice in support of the immediate and long term health of the mother and infant. The most effective means of ensuring such practice is to make it part of the standard of accreditation of hospitals with maternity units. Short of this there needs to be a clear directive, rather than merely encouragement, from the Food and Health Bureau that hospitals should work towards the standards of being Baby Friendly. For public hospitals, this should also be accompanied allocation of appropriate resources which are much more than addition of one middle ranking nursing staff to each hospital cluster. The commitment needs to come from top hospital management with additional and reprioritizing the use of resources both human and space. It requires a thorough review of the existing practices to meet these standards of good practice. Complying with the WHO / UNICEF Statement on “Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding” “in general” is not an acceptable response to the UN Committee.

Addressing recurrent concerns of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is very much concerned with narrowing the intergeneration poverty gap, care of the aging population and environmental protection. The first years of life lay the foundation of the child’s future. Whatever the family background of the child, his/her

mother's milk is free and equally good, giving the child the best start in life. Breastfeeding provides the child with the nutrition and maternal infant interaction for optimal physical, psychological and cognitive development. Benefits of breastfeeding to the child's short, medium and long term health are beyond question. There are also more and more evidence that breastfeeding reduces not only the mother's risk of breast cancer but contributes to other aspects of maternal health like the reduction of cardiovascular disease. Without the need to produce artificial formula milk transported to Hong Kong via long distance, the need to dispose of bottles, teats, and tins and the use of energy in the preparation of formula milk, breastfeeding is not only baby and mother friendly but also friendly to our earth.

Comprehensive strategy

The ability of mothers to initiate and sustain breastfeeding will not come by from just encouraging mothers to breastfeed. The UN Committee, in order to make the CRC meaningful to children in Hong Kong, had recommended that Hong Kong has a comprehensive plan of action with its implementation supported by budgetary allocation and monitored by an independent institution. For breastfeeding, WHO and UNICEF have long laid down the provisions needed for the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding. These are clearly stated in the Innocenti Declaration of 1990, re-emphasised and elaborated in 2005. Unfortunately, as the government continues to justify why Hong Kong need not heed UN Committee's recommendations mentioned, WHO / UNICEF's recommendations on breastfeeding are similarly ignored. The Breastfeeding Policy of the Department of Health remains that of the department. Even the Hospital Authority, the major healthcare provider in Hong Kong, does not have a policy like the Department of Health to support staff breastfeeding at the workplace on resumption of duties. Of course, there is yet to be a Hong Kong wide policy to support mothers to exclusively breastfeed for 6 months and continue breastfeeding with the introduction of appropriate complementary foods to two years or beyond. The lack of overall co-ordination means maternity leave of 10 weeks have remained so for decades without any indication from the Welfare and Labour Bureau of a review, not to mention compulsory nursing breaks and rooms for milk expression in the workplace. Recommendations of Baby Care rooms by the Buildings Department to be provided voluntarily continue to be diagrams on paper with no time frame for full implementation.



Conclusion – Need for immediate action

Our association completed an assessment for Hong Kong using the World Breastfeeding Trend Initiative tool in 2008 mentioned in our submission in 2009 to the Panel on Constitutional Affairs on the outline of the second report of HKKSAR. Hong Kong scored 27 out of a total of 150. This assessment was repeated in 2012.¹ The score for Hong Kong although increased to 37/150, was far lower than other places even in 2008 like China with 80/150 and Republic of Korea with 107/150. If Hong Kong does not want to proceed in a snail's pace, as the government finalises the HK Code and its mode of implementation, this is an opportune time to put in place a comprehensive strategy in infant and young child feeding. Instead of repeating concerns for a sustainable future for Hong Kong year in and year out, Hong Kong should act and act in a responsible way for the children now, and for children in the years to come.

¹ World Breastfeeding Trend Initiative report on Hong Kong 2012 accessible at:
<http://www.babyfriendly.org.hk/en/breastfeeding-in-hk/wbti/>