

## Promoting nutrition education in north-east Brazil

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In Brazil, nutrition education is a responsibility of nutritionists, but in practice it is carried out by all health professionals who deal with promoting health and nutrition for the population. Even though there have been great reductions in child malnutrition within Brazil over recent years, promoting child nutrition is still a main concern for those working in public health all over the country, but particularly in north-east Brazil where the child malnutrition rate is still high in relation to other regions of the country.

During the last 7 years, an academic link between the Federal University of Ceará and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, sponsored by the British Council – Northeast Brazil and Ceará State government, and including Ceará State University and the Ceará School of Public Health, has been implemented to promote mother and child health and nutrition in north-east Brazil.

In Ceará state (Monte & Sá 1998), as in other regions of Brazil (Monte *et al.* 2002), the infant feeding pattern is poor:

- exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months is rare;
- breastfeeding duration is low;
- complementary foods are introduced too early;
- there is poor nutritional and bacterial quality;
- diarrhoea is frequent when complementary feeding is started.

Within this context, the academic link partners identified the need for nutrition education as a priority and a

contact was established with the British Nutrition Foundation in 2001 to start to further develop collaborative work to improve the teaching of nutrition education by the definition of educational methods and the production of materials.

In November 2002, the First International Seminar on Nutrition Education was held in Fortaleza, capital town of Ceará (approximately 2.5 million inhabitants). The seminar was opened by the Ceará State Health Secretary. At the seminar, 70 health professionals including local paediatricians, nutritionists, nurses, and pre- and post-graduate students of medicine and nutrition were trained.

The objectives of the seminar were:

- to provide updated and practical knowledge on how to design and implement nutrition education to improve the nutritional status of mothers and children in North-east Brazil;
- to gather practical suggestions on how to improve nutrition education for mothers and children in Ceará, to be incorporated in the work on nutrition education being currently implemented by the academic link partners.

The seminar programme included a series of useful presentations from a variety of viewpoints, which prompted lively discussion. Topics discussed included:

- the nutritional situation of mothers and children in north-east Brazil and the professional responsibility and importance of properly implemented nutrition education (Professor Maria Lucia Barreto from the Department of Nutrition Science of the Ceará State University);
- British experience of Nutrition Education for school children (Stephanie Valentine, Education Director of the British Nutrition Foundation);

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- worldwide experience of educational interventions to promote mother and child health and nutrition (Dr Esther Weyne from Fortaleza University);
- governmental experience in running the Family Health Programme, which covers about 85% of the 6 million Ceará population (Dr Paola Borba, Head of Health Services of Ceará Health Secretariat);
- the implications of the social differences of the cultural aspects in community nutrition (Marlene D'Avila from Ceará State University);
- the influence of cultural aspects on the feeding of small children (*e.g.* the effect of regional taboos) and the need to consider anthropological data in the design of effective material for nutrition education (Dr Marylin Nations from Harvard and Fortaleza Universities);
- how to define, design and apply educational messages that are feasible for implementation by mothers living under unfavourable conditions and how health professionals should act to deliver these messages to mothers (Dr Cristina Monte from Federal University of Ceará);
- the feasibility of nutrition rehabilitation at the household level: pitfalls of current worldwide experience in treating severely malnourished children; current World Health Organization guidelines for the nutrition rehabilitation of severely malnourished children, key aspects for the home treatment of those children and the level of training necessary for parents and community health

workers to prevent relapses and unnecessary child deaths (Professor Ann Ashworth, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine).

Participants undertook individual and group work in order to identify and prioritise major barriers to nutrition and health education, successful strategies, key messages and appropriate resources. The major priorities identified were promoting complementary feeding, nutrition education for school children and child nutrition rehabilitation, particularly at community level. These were used as a basis for further work by the seminar co-ordinating group. Collaborative work is currently in progress to develop educational materials on complementary feeding for mothers and health workers and educational materials for school children and teachers.

## References

- Monte CMG & Sá MLB (1998) Guias alimentares para crianças de 6 a 23 meses do Nordeste do Brasil: da teoria á prática. British Council – Northeast Brazil, Fortaleza.
- Monte CMG, Giugliane ER, Carvalho M, de FCC *et al.* (2002) Guia alimentar para crianças menores de 2 anos. Série <sup>a</sup> Normas e Manuais Técnicos no 107. Ministério da Saúde/Organização Panamericana de Saúde. Brasília.