

## Breastfeeding, nature's gift for infant growth and development

*Lactancia materna, un regalo de la naturaleza para el crecimiento y el desarrollo de los infantes*

Exclusive breastfeeding (BF) is the best feeding option for infants under 6 months of age. After this age, complementary feeding with other solid foods and liquids is advised for 1 to 2 years in addition to breast milk or formula. It is well established that BF has physical and emotional health benefits for both mother and child, as it has been demonstrated that it improves long-term neurological development, decreases the incidence of chronic diseases such as obesity, and stimulates the immune system function in children, while also reducing sleep deprivation in mothers and strengthening the mother-child relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the enormous and undeniable benefits of BF, including the reduction in the number of infant deaths, when it is not done properly it remains a major cause of infant morbidity and mortality in developing countries.<sup>2</sup> There are personal and sociocultural conditions, in these places that impede its effective implementation, and this is a critical point to address because the information mothers receive can have a positive or negative effect on breastfeeding. In this regard, Vargas-Zarate *et al.*,<sup>3</sup> reported in a literature review on myths and beliefs about BF that most of them have no scientific basis and limit its practice.

In Colombia, policies have been developed to promote BF, such as the 2010-2020 Ten-Year Breastfeeding Plan of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection,<sup>4</sup> which established various actions to protect and promote this type of feeding. However, according to the National Survey of Nutritional Status in Colombia (ENSIN) 2015, the rates of exclusive and complementary BF in the country are low.<sup>5</sup> Given this scenario, the new Ten-Year Plan for Breastfeeding and Complementary Feeding - PDLMAC 2021-2030<sup>6</sup> established certain protection interventions aimed at children under the age of two years, which constitute a public policy designed to ensure that this population receives the best available nutrition, implying that their diet must be based on BF.

The PDLMAC 2021-2030 sets as a target for 2030 that at least 51% of infants under the age of six months are exclusively breastfed and at least 71.9% of children under the age of one receive complementary foods in addition to breastfeeding. Thus, it is expected that this plan will generate cost-effective interventions that promote children's nutrition in Colombia and improve BF indicators in the country.

This issue of the Journal of the Faculty of Medicine presents a qualitative research by Pinzon-Villate *et al.*<sup>7</sup> aimed at understanding the experiences of a group of 19 lactating mothers receiving exclusive BF counseling at Women and Child Friendly Institutions in Bogotá, D.C. In their study, they found that half of the mothers encountered difficulties with this practice, for which they received only information about reinforcing the breastfeeding technique, a negative and imposing attitude toward the difficulties, and recommendations such as initiating infant formulas when they sought assistance from health personnel. In addition, the authors found that most advice provided to women is limited to the breastfeeding technique and does not focus on the mother as a primary pillar of this type of feeding. Therefore, they recommend developing effective strategies for training health staff in this area and improve the country's BF indicators.

Before concluding, it is important to emphasize the benefits of BF on the mental health of the infant population that receives it. For decades, it has been known that breastfed infants have a better leadership profile and intellectual development than

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non-breastfed children; it has also been demonstrated that affection ties, warmth, and security strengthen the mother-child bond. Finally, it is worth noting that BF makes the mother who practices it more responsible for her child's growth and development.

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