

Diamonds are Forever!

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To all the readers of *Indian Pediatrics*, I wish you and your family a happy and healthy 2023. Over the last few months, the daily caseload of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been steadily declining in India, and we seem to be optimistically entering a post-pandemic era. It is time now to implement the numerous lessons learned over the last two years, as well as to reinvigorate pre-pandemic efforts to improve child health in India, which continues to be the core mandate of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP).

The IAP celebrates its Diamond Jubilee year this year, which is a good time to reflect on all that we have collectively achieved while reminding ourselves of all that is yet to be done. Milestones like the diamond jubilee year allow us to feel a sense of pride and appreciation for what our predecessors have achieved through the organization. In 1964, the organization pledged to raise the standards of the medical profession and medical education to provide quality care to every child in the country; to stimulate cordial relationships among all pediatricians and nurture the growth and diffusion of medical knowledge in every corner of the country. These founding tenets remain just as relevant in 2023, as IAP strives to achieve the best possible preventive and curative care for every child, irrespective of gender/region/socioeconomic strata/caste etc.

India still has a long way to go to ensure every child is adequately nourished and receives the right developmental environment to grow to her full potential. NFHS-5 data [1], released in the thick of the pandemic, exposed some worrying trends about the double threat of malnutrition in the country. On the one hand, the data shows an increase in severe wasting in children less than five years of age and only a marginal decrease in stunting. On the other hand, the survey made another startling revelation – an increasing number of under-five children are overweight. With rapid urbanization and easy access to “ordering in,” we may be staring at the very real threat of childhood obesity and diabetes, something we thought (until very recently) is a public health challenge

only in developed countries. These figures show that while one segment of society may not have access to essential nutrients, another segment is relying more and more on empty calories and junk food – both leading to the insidious outcome of child malnutrition. As a collective, IAP must step up our advocacy efforts to enhance policies that aim to improve nutritional outcomes in children. But we should also look for instances in our daily practice where we can monitor and track growth rates and identify danger signs early. Growth charts are simple but powerful tools that we are all equipped with, to identify children whose growth status is worrying and needs more attention. The child does not enter obesity without crossing over the overweight line and the same holds at the other extreme of undernutrition. Though, we all have the growth charts printed and attached to the patient record file, timely plotting on the chart is as important as documenting the immunization details. Weight for age is noted by most but somehow length/height for age and weight for length/height is overlooked when we very well know that stunting is almost irreversible after two years of age. I urge you all to use the IAP growth chart to track the growth of every child who comes to your clinic.

Secondly, we have made only marginal gains in breastfeeding practices in the country, over the last half-decade. The incidence of early initiation (within one hour of birth) has been almost stagnant since 2015. Every IAP member attending a delivery must ensure that every newborn baby is allowed direct skin to skin contact and thereby a chance to initiate breastfeeding within an hour after birth, whether in the labor room or OT. While the uptake of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months has improved in this period (54.9% in 2015-16 to 63.7% in 2019-20), there is still a lot of scope to improve. For every challenge in the successful implementation of exclusive breastfeeding, there is a scientific and evidence-based solution that only needs our time and total commitment. Complementary feeding practice after the six-month mark has improved only slightly (42.7% in 2015-16 to 45.9% in 2019-20). Only 11.3% of children in the 6-23 month bracket

are receiving an adequate diet – which means only one in ten infants is obtaining sufficient nourishment. With all the discourse around early child development and the emphasis on the first 1,000 days of life, this finding serves as a rude reality check for all of us.

I would propose making the '6-month visit' a milestone pediatric check-up for the child, wherein we can use it as an opportunity to closely inspect the status of the child's growth while also counseling the parents on the importance of a minimum acceptable diet, dietary diversity and initiating complementary feeding while continuing breastfeeding. Spending time on this routine 6-month visit will surely pay rich dividends as it also allows the pediatrician to assess not only the gross and fine motor milestones but the social communication skills too, which can alert us for certain red flags.

Nurturing Care-Early Care Development (NC-ECD), the flagship program of IAP started in 2021, by the then President Dr. Piyush Gupta [2], has reached a milestone of hundred workshops conducted all over the country, and another hundred in the pipeline for 2023. Although, our workshops train the pediatricians, the ultimate goal is that this training reaches parents/caregivers, sensitizing them about the importance of NC-ECD during the 'well-child' visits and to bringing about a positive behavior change in them. We still need to ideate on simple, affordable and feasible methods to reach a maximum number of beneficiaries. Dr Nandita Chatterjee, from team Udbhaas CDC in collaboration with UNICEF Kolkata has published a novel idea of roping in frontline workers and young girls from the community itself, to further disseminate the merits of NC-ECD to new parents [3]. I hope that such voices from the field inspire more novel ideas, which is the need of the hour for the program to have a significant reach and impact.

Lastly, a word about strengthening our immunization practices. Towards the end of last year, we had an unexpected and unfortunate surge of measles in many areas of the country. It has taught us the lesson that 'not lowering the guard' was not meant only for COVID-19 but in fact for all infectious diseases. Let us ensure complete

protection to every child from vaccine preventable diseases by advocating and offering age-appropriate vaccines.

As the largest body of pediatricians in the country, we can make a significant difference to child health in India by adopting these simple yet impactful measures in our day-to-day practice. In a post-pandemic world, children are looking at a dizzyingly fast-paced, virtual and competitive future, set in deteriorating climatic conditions, which brings along its own set of challenges to their mental and physical well-being. We are also witnessing the co-existence of contradictory public health challenges (e.g., rising number of overweight and underweight children). The time is now to go in with all guns blazing to advocate and act on early initiation of breast feeding, exclusive breast feeding for six months, timely introduction of complementary feeding, growth monitoring, strengthening our immunization practices, and finally empowering and guiding every parent/caregiver in applying principals of NC- ECD to prevent a cascade of more serious child health problems in the future.

When it is said that 'Diamonds are forever,' it actually means a diamond never loses its value. Similarly, in IAP's diamond jubilee year, let us all pledge to collectively work to overcome newer challenges for better health and wellbeing of our children, keeping our core values intact.

In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

– George Washington

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