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UP district is 'baby-friendly' mascot

Himanshi Dhawan, TNN, Aug 1, 2010, 01.16am IST

NEW DELHI: The nation's fight against malnutrition and infant mortality has an unlikely mascot in Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh. The nondescript district, which has a population of around 10 lakh, boasts of an enviable turnaround that started in 2007, thanks to the launch of "Baby Friendly Community Health Initiative".

Prior to that in 2006, Lalitpur had an infant mortality rate of 72 per 1,000 births — usually, around 30,000 babies are born here annually — and the malnutrition figure was 42% against a national average of 46%. Three years on, the results have, indeed, been encouraging. The project, which aimed to provide nutritional intervention for both mother and child, has not only led to a steady decline of infant mortality but exclusive breastfeeding of young infants 0-6 months has also increased from a mere 7% to an impressive 50%. Consequently, underweight children have come down from 42% to 26%.

The project had focussed on the importance of early and exclusive breastfeeding for first six months to improve a child's survival chances, importance of good complementary feeding, and development of a sustainable model for the district.

Six hundred villages across the district were covered, ably supported by the Gorakhpur Medical College (GMC) and UNICEF. Run on a paltry annual budget of Rs 42 lakh, it provided the much-needed counselling for lactating mothers in their homes. The simple but effective idea was spearheaded by the Gorakhpur Medical College's department of paediatrics, and implemented by young social workers from Lalitpur and Gorakhpur districts.

Altogether, 3,339 people were trained to educate mothers and relatives on antenatal care, sanitation, advantages of breastfeeding a newborn exclusively up to six months, complementary feeding and teaching mothers to express milk if they were unable to feed their loved ones directly.

Each community was mentored by a mothers' support group. Dr K P Kushwaha, project director and head of paediatrics, GMC, said, "This was necessary as the situation in Lalitpur was worse than the rest of UP." The project also helped dispel many popular misconceptions, like breastfeeding is a natural skill. "A mother needs a strong support system to allow her to feed the child," Dr Kushwaha said.

Incidentally, about 50% of the "mentors", who provided the training and counselling to the mothers, were men. "Of the 48 counsellors, there were 26 women and 24 men. We had to involve the men not only because the community as a whole had to be targeted to achieve behavioural change but also some villages in Lalitpur were spread over far-flung areas," Dr Arun Gupta from Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India said.

According to Dr Gupta, the scheme can easily be replicated in 600 districts of the country, with the addition of a nutritional counsellor. "It would require appointing 6-8 lakh anganwadi workers, and an added burden of Rs 240 crore annually," he said.

Lalitpur's district programme officer B L Gupta said the team took religious leaders like maulvis and priests into confidence and, at times, even sought their assistance to make the project a success.

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