

# Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition

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## Optimal Duration of Exclusive Breastfeeding and Introduction of Weaning

### 1. Issue

At the last meeting of SACN, the committee was asked to comment on the recommendation by the *Ad hoc* Expert Group on Child and Maternal Nutrition on the optimal duration of breastfeeding. Members requested to see the minutes of the *ad hoc* group meeting and the papers on the issue to facilitate discussion and comment. In addition, as requested by the committee a recent paper by Prof Lucas on duration of breastfeeding and arterial distensibility in early adult life has also been included. These are attached as annexes.

### 2. Background

2.1 In 1994 COMA report on *Weaning and Weaning Diets* stated that breastfeeding offers the newborn the best nutrition and that there are health benefits for infants who are exclusively breastfed during the first months of life. COMA recommended that solid foods should be introduced between the ages of 4 to 6 months. Key recommendations (and pages) of the report on which current UK policy is based are at Annex 1.

2.2 In early 2000 WHO commissioned a systematic review of the published scientific literature on the optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding. The original timetable envisaged the consideration of the issue in May 2002. However, due to pressure from a number of countries, in January 2001, the WHO Executive Board agreed that the issue would be discussed at the World Health Assembly meeting in May 2001.

2.3 In the light of the WHO activity, and to inform UK position on the issue, in December 2000 we convened an *ad hoc* Expert Group on Child Nutrition under the chairmanship of Professor Alan Jackson, the Chair of the new Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN). It included the members of the former COMA Panel on Child and Maternal Nutrition. The minutes (Annex 2) of the meeting and the scientific evidence and other papers considered are at annex 3,4 and 64. The group agreed that:

*"That there is sufficient scientific evidence that exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months is nutritionally adequate".*

*However the group noted that early introduction of complementary foods is normal practice in the UK and that mothers do this for many valid personal, social and economic reasons. They therefore recommended that there should*

*be some flexibility in the advice, but that any complementary feeding should not be introduced before the end of 4 months (17 weeks).*

2.4 The WHO review was completed in April 2001. The conclusions and recommendations have been published but the full scientific report has not yet been published. The conclusions and recommendations of the review presented to the World Health Assembly in May 2001 are at Annex 5. Published comments leading up to the WHO report which were also considered by the *Ad hoc* group are at Annex 6.

The expert committee made the following recommendation:

*“The expert committee recommend exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months with the introduction of complementary foods and continued breastfeeding thereafter. This recommendation applies to populations. The expert committee recognise that some mothers will be unable to, or choose not to, follow this recommendation; they should be supported to optimise their infants’ nutrition.”*

### **3. Current position**

3.1 At the World Health Assembly in May resolutions on Infant and Child Nutrition were adopted (see papers for first SACN meeting). The key resolution on optimal duration of breastfeeding broadly supports the UK line and the conclusions of the *ad hoc* Expert Group. The following key resolution on recommended length of exclusive breastfeeding was passed:

*“to strengthen activities and develop new approaches to protect, promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for six months as a global public health recommendation, taking into account the findings of the WHO expert consultation on optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding, and to provide safe and appropriate complementary foods, with continued breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond, emphasising channels of social dissemination of these concepts in order to lead communities to adhere to these practices.”*

3.2 The UK supported this resolution at the World Health Assembly in May 2001.

3.3 In the UK, current advice on breastfeeding is still based on the COMA recommendations in the *Weaning and Weaning diets* published in 1994. This also provides the guidance on infant feeding to all health professionals and does not reflect the recent WHO recommendations. There is a need for clear advice on the optimal duration of breastfeeding and age of introduction of weaning for health professionals and industry, as well as for dissemination to the general public.

### **4 Other recent papers of relevance (at Annex 7 and 8):**

Leeson CPM et al. Duration of breast feeding and arterial distensibility in early adult life: population based study. *BMJ* 2001;322:643-7.

Lanigan JA et al. Systematic review concerning the age of introduction of complementary foods to the healthy full-term infants. *EJCN* 2001;55:309-320

**Members are requested**

- **to note the WHO resolution on the optimal length of breast feeding**
- **to comment on the *ad hoc* Expert group's recommendation**
- **to consider how to disseminate the above recommendations**