



Safeguarding children's right to the best form of nurture: an interview with Dr Patricia Ip

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It is in every mother's nature to go to the ends of the earth to secure the best for her baby. However, are mothers aware that the ability to provide the best form of nurture to their children has always lain in their own hands, and is instinctive? This is what Dr Patricia Ip has been trying hard to protect—breastfeeding as a fundamental human right.

"Breastfeeding is much more than providing nutrition—it is inherently a form of nurturing exercise that strengthens mother-baby bonding." An experienced paediatrician who has worked for many years at the United Christian Hospital and as a Council member of the Hong Kong College of Paediatricians, Dr Patricia Ip Lai-sheung has become an iconic figure in the promotion of breastfeeding. Her enthusiasm is evident in her major contributions that include serving as the current Vice-Chairperson of UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association, as a member of the Committee on Promotion of Breastfeeding of HKSAR Government, and as Chief Editor of 'Self Learning Kit on Breastfeeding for Health Professionals' produced by the Department of Health. She also has other interests related to children's rights, such as fighting against child abuse. Despite having retired as a physician in 2007, she has persisted in her voluntary work in the advocacy of children's rights. Dr Ip's unrelenting devotion stems from her deep-rooted belief that it is a paediatrician's obligation and duty

to defend a child's right to the highest attainable standard of health.

Dr Ip is convinced that the transformation of the local environment into one that supports breastfeeding requires the assistance of many sectors of society. Such work takes time and requires collaborative efforts. This can range from teaching the benefits and management of breastfeeding itself, but also in conjunction with other topics such as gastroenteritis and obesity, to health care professionals, to training volunteers to hold meetings and discussions with employers. Ultimately, it is about enlightening society so that it embraces the importance of breastfeeding followed by the introduction of supportive ancillary facilities and measures in hospitals, the workplace, and public areas.

Dr Ip has been concentrating on work to realise the ideas and objectives of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), a UNICEF initiative to advocate breastfeeding, in Hong Kong. She has been voluntarily working for the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association since the establishment of its committee in 1992, the year she was elected as chairperson. One of the goals of the association is to implement the WHO/UNICEF "Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding" that summarises the maternity practices necessary to support breastfeeding in hospitals. As part of the

joint statement published by the WHO and UNICEF in 1989 “Protecting, Promoting and Supporting Breastfeeding: The Special Role of Maternity Services”, this set of guidelines aims to encourage local hospitals to implement policies and provide the necessary facilities and human resources to support breastfeeding and hence become ‘baby-friendly’. She is constantly invited to speak at conferences and seminars and helped to organise events such as World Breastfeeding Week, disseminating updates on breastfeeding support. Dr Ip spares no effort in developing educational material for mothers and professionals alike, and encouraging hospitals to be certified as a ‘baby-friendly hospital’ by implementing standards of best practice.

Another focus of her work involves monitoring the marketing of breast milk substitutes. Immersed in the commercialised ambience of Hong Kong, parents are often subconsciously bombarded by a proliferation of literature from companies who claim that their products are indispensable to a child’s growth and development. Prevalent propaganda and advertisements for various milk formulas and milk substitutes are creating a burgeoning demand for their products. Mothers are prompted to view these products as an essential form of nourishment for their babies. In an attempt to prevent the commercially partisan promotions by these companies from governing parents’ perceptions and concepts of infant nutrition any further, Dr Ip has led a dedicated campaign to urge businesses to comply with the “International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes”. She can also be spotted at legislative committee meetings, providing a professional opinion on the composition and labelling requirements of formula milk as well as regulation of formula milk commercials.

These efforts have not been without obstacles. Despite an appreciable increase in the rate of breastfeeding initiation from 19% in 1992 to 84% in 2013, the exclusive breastfeeding rate at 6 months after hospital discharge and beyond remains low. This trend signifies an increasing awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding among Hong Kong mothers since Dr Ip took the lead in the local journey of breastfeeding advocacy as chairperson of the Hong Kong branch of BFHI. Nonetheless obstacles remain that discourage continuation of breastfeeding: hospital practices that are not conducive to exclusive breastfeeding, lack of support after discharge, short maternity leave, cultural opinion of breastfeeding in public, and a high dependence on formula milk. These obstacles remain to be overcome when protecting the interests of children in Hong Kong.

Twenty years of arduous and collaborative work has started to show promise: in 2013 the first hospital in Hong Kong pledged to work towards designation as a Baby-Friendly Hospital within 5

years. This serves as one of the highest achievements of Dr Ip and her colleagues. Dr Ip has also been enjoying the process of facilitating communication between medical practitioners across domains and departments, as well as different disciplines in society. Witnessing concerted efforts that strive to achieve a common goal has been an immense source of satisfaction for her. Striving for what she believes to be right and best for society has been a long journey, and there have been moments when progress was slow. Plans have had to be put on hold because of changes in personnel, but Dr Ip takes all this in her stride. “Efforts made would never be wasted. Success may not be achieved all at once, but you know you are on the right track,” she recalled. Today, with Dr Ip’s unflinching perseverance along with the support of her colleagues, four public Obstetric Units are already on their way to gaining Baby-Friendly Hospital accreditation. Dr Ip and her team expect all public hospitals to be Baby-Friendly before 2020, the time frame agreed by the Hospital Authority. “Once the first successful case is witnessed, subsequent successful cases would ensue with much more ease. Having the first Baby-Friendly Hospital would be a milestone in our strife for the betterment of the nurture for our children in the not-too-distant future.”



(Facing page)
Celebrating World Breastfeeding Week during 1-7 August 2013

(Top)
Briefing hospital administrators on designation of Baby-Friendly Hospital in January 2013

(Bottom)
Dr Ip (centre) with student reporters, Ellen Mui (left) and Jaime Chung (right)