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A rewarding journey promoting  
breastfeeding for 30 years

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anywhere without anyone  
blinking an eyelid.”**

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The breastfeeding rate at hospital discharge in Hong Kong increased from 19% in 1992 to the now 86.5%. This is the result of the effort from many parties including the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Committee formed and supported by UNICEF HK in 1992. The Committee was registered as a non-profit organization, Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association (BFHIHKA) in June 1994.

**Supporting the Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative to enhance mother-infant bonding**

The mission of BFHIHKA is to promote and protect breastfeeding. As a committee member for many years, Dr Patricia Ip witnessed the development of the association’s strategy. In the early years, the focus was on the training of health workers; when the time was ripe, it was



More and more health facilities have committed to the baby-friendly hospital initiative; above is the Baby-Friendly Hospital Designation Ceremony at Queen Mary Hospital in 2018. (Dr. Patricia Ip is front row, second from the right).

the promotion of the Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI). The association became the institution to accredit baby-friendly health facilities. Today, the scheme covers all public and some maternal and child health centres to create a breastfeeding-friendly environment for the newborns. The association, from its inception, advocated the implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (the Code) in Hong Kong to regulate the inappropriate marketing of formula milk. Every year, the celebration of the World Breastfeeding Week is a major event to heighten community awareness.

In 1992, when UNICEF HK noticed the pressing need to promote breastfeeding in Hong Kong, the then chairman Dr. Robert Fung invited Ip to be one of the founding members of BFHIHKA. Ip modestly said she was just a novice in the promotion of breastfeeding territory-wide when she first joined BFHIHKA. “As a paediatrician, breastfeeding is my concern. When I was a medical student, I didn’t know much about the subject. It wasn’t until I worked in the UK that I had the sense of how breastfeeding was being supported in practice,” she said. Having joined BFHIHKA for nearly 30 years, Ip pointed out that in the journey of promoting breastfeeding, achieving an objective such as the BFHI, may need years of preparation and advocacy supported by resources.

The BFHI was launched by WHO and UNICEF in 1991 as a global campaign to encourage healthcare facilities to remove barriers to breastfeeding by implementing the “Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding” (Ten Steps). The Ten Steps also include compliance with the Code which requires hospitals not to accept free infant formula, a traditional practice in Hong Kong hospitals.

For years Ip and her colleagues in the Hospital Authority did much ground work towards the discontinuation of free supplies of infant formula. With the effort from many parties, public hospitals stopped the practice in 2010 and became more energetic in encouraging mothers to breastfeed. With the liaison of UNICEF HK, Ip visited the UNICEF UK office to learn about their experiences in accrediting baby-friendly hospitals. “International communication is very important,” she said. “UNICEF HK can help us contact relevant experts for advice whenever necessary and invite them to assist us with our advocacy work or be speakers in seminars.”

In 2013, the time was right to launch the BFHI accreditation scheme in Hong Kong. In 2016, Queen Elizabeth Hospital was the first hospital accredited as a baby-friendly hospital followed by Queen Mary Hospital and Prince of Wales Hospital in 2018 and



World Breastfeeding Week is a major annual celebration hosted by the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association. The event encourages the society and family members to support mothers to continue breastfeeding for better nutrition and health. (Photo provided by interviewee).

2019. The remaining five public hospitals with maternity units and one private hospital are currently undergoing different stages of the accreditation procedure, with the Initiative being extended to maternal and child health centers.

“These days, mothers still encounter various difficulties in breastfeeding but with the help of health workers and relevant support, there has been much improvement. For example, the fourth of the Ten Steps recommends babies to have skin-to-skin contact with their mothers at birth to help initiate breastfeeding. Previously, babies were wrapped up once the mothers had checked the babies’ gender. Baby-friendly hospitals encourage skin-to-skin contact creating a totally different feeling for mothers,” said Ip. She appreciates the ongoing efforts of UNICEF and WHO in updating the Ten Steps in-line with current research, the most recent revision being in 2018.

### Collaborating to encourage mothers to sustain breastfeeding

To encourage mothers to sustain breastfeeding after they are discharged from hospital, UNICEF HK launched the “Say Yes to Breastfeeding” campaign in 2015, raising public awareness of the needs of breastfeeding mothers. The campaign helps build a positive attitude towards breastfeeding and promotes breastfeeding-friendly workplaces and premises. This initiative has attracted more and more enterprises, shopping malls, and restaurants to participate. “There has been significant progress in breastfeeding,” Ip said. “Mothers are more confident. If they don’t want to breastfeed in public, they can choose to go to a baby care room. But I hope one day all mothers can breastfeed their babies anytime, anywhere without anyone blinking an eyelid.”

In addition to the social settings, accurate information also influences family attitudes towards breastfeeding. Since its establishment, the BFHIHK has monitored the implementation of the Code paying attention to inappropriate marketing strategies that promote formula milk as a substitute for breastmilk. As most mothers know breastfeeding is best for their babies, manufacturers use the benefits of breastmilk to promote formula milk, for example, declaring human milk oligosaccharide (HMO) has been added to the product when only one of the many HMOs in breastmilk has been added. Furthermore, in fine print, there is a disclaimer that the HMO added did not originate from breastmilk to diminish consumers’ ability to distinguish the difference between formula milk and breastmilk. “We have now switched our strategy from explaining mainly the benefits of breastmilk to empowering mothers to sustain breastfeeding,” said Ip.

### Future aspirations

With the BFHIHK celebrating its 29th anniversary, UNICEF HK is also welcoming its 35th anniversary. “Looking back, I think the role of UNICEF HK in the promotion of breastfeeding is very important,” said Ip. “In future, hopefully there will be more collaboration on policies. Other than supporting mothers to breastfeed, attention can be paid to having the Hong Kong Code legislated, further extension of maternity leave, etc. UNICEF HK can play a pivotal role at the level of system and policy changes.”