

Infant Mortality – The Barometer of Health Status

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Golden opportunities exist for significant improvement in infant and child health in Bahrain and all the Arab Gulf States.

Areas which offer hope include extension of immunisation programmes, promotion of breast-feeding, utilisation of oral rehydration therapy for diarrhoeal disease and growth monitoring for early detection of malnutrition or developmental abnormality. To evaluate the objectives realised by these vital programmes reliable statistics are mandatory.

At last, and after numerous deliberations, the Council of Health Ministers for the Arab Gulf States in its meeting held in Muscat (Oman) in January 1986 issued an edict to take the proposed survey project seriously and come up with reliable figures for infant mortality in their countries¹.

The stage is set, funds are available, what is needed is action to move things in the right direction and step into the 21st century on firm ground.

In 1983, Finland led the world in the list of low infant mortality with a rate of 6.2 per 1000 live births. However, in 1984 Japan has reported a new all time low rate of 6.0 ! (See Table).

Although every country among the lowest 25 had a rate less than the lowest rate only 25 years ago, many large and wealthy countries in the Western world have infant mortality rates at least 40% higher than the rate for Japan. We are waiting for the day when Arab Gulf States find their place in the list of low infant mortalities.

How can we witness the progress in reducing infant mortality, when we have no reliable figure to quote and use as a reference point. To achieve improved health for all of the children, as an ultimate goal, mortality reduction is not the only indicator but remains as a significant indicator. I believe that the ball is now in the court of the individual Arab Gulf countries. Are we going to see some action ? Let us keep our fingers crossed !

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TABLE
Infant mortality for 10 countries
with the lowest rates*

Country	Infant Mortality (per 1000 live births)	
	1983	1984
Japan	6.2	6.0
Sweden	7.0	6.3
Switzerland	7.6	7.1
Netherlands	8.4	8.4
Hong Kong	9.9	9.2
United Kingdom	10.2	9.6
German Democratic Republic	10.7	10.0
United States	11.2	10.6
Austria	11.9	11.5
Italy	12.4	11.6

*Data from the United Nations Statistical Office^{2,3}.

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