

Extend maternal leave to 6 months

...to promote exclusive breastfeeding —GHS D-G

BY ABIGAIL ANNOH

THE Ghana Health Service (GHS) has reiterated calls for a review of the country's labour laws to extend maternity leave from three to at least six months to promote exclusive breastfeeding.

The appeal follows two decades of stagnated breastfeeding rates in Ghana, raising concerns over the health, development and socio-economic implications.

According to the 2022 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDHS), almost half (47.4 per cent) of babies aged zero to five months in Ghana are not exclusively breastfed.

Speaking at the launch of this year's World Breastfeeding Week and National Breastfeeding Month in Accra on Thursday, the Director

of Family Health at the GHS, Dr Kennedy Brightson who represented the Director-General, urged the government to expedite action.

"If we advocate for exclusive breastfeeding for six months, why don't we allow women to stay at home and breastfeed for six months? Currently, we ask them to breastfeed exclusively for six months but grant only three months of maternity leave.

How do they continue for the remaining three months? I believe the good listening ears of the President and the government will take action on it," he said.

This year's celebration, on the theme "Prioritise Breastfeeding, Create Sustainable Support Systems", highlights the need for supportive policies, societal involvement, and long-term structures to promote breastfeeding.

Dr Brightson announced plans by the GHS to collaborate with

corporate organisations to set up breastfeeding booths at strategic locations across the country to encourage the practice.

While directing health facilities to establish breastfeeding corners to support the practice, he warned them to refrain from advertising and endorsing breastmilk substitutes.

"If we find out that you use your facility as a platform for promoting these baby foods, we shall deal with you ruthlessly according to law," he cautioned.

Dr Brightson stressed that it was high time breastfeeding is seen as a "powerful foundation for lifelong health, development, and equity."

"Breastfeeding delivers a hopeful future, not only for children, but for societies. Breastfeeding delivers a hopeful future, not only for chil-

dren, but for societies. It reduces healthcare costs, boosts cognitive development, strengthens economies, and sets children up with healthy beginnings," he noted.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Country Representative, Dr Fiona Braka in a speech read on her behalf urged the government to enforce breastfeeding regulations while investing in sustainable support systems, to improve exclusive breastfeeding rates.

"Breastfeeding is not just a mother's responsibility but a community effort. Families, friends, employers and communities as a support system must speak up, advocating for policies and environment that make breastfeeding easier and more accessible and where breastfeeding is welcomed and encouraged," she noted.

The Executive Director of Women, Media and Change (WOMEC), Dr Charity Binka among others recommended institutionalising breastfeeding-friendly environments by mandating dedicated spaces for breastfeeding in public institutions, health facilities, transport terminals, and private workplaces.

"We must integrate breastfeeding targets into national nutrition, education, and social protection strategies with dedicated budget lines and accountability mechanisms.

Let us urgently revamp and expand the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) across all 16 regions, ensuring every facility supports immediate skin-to-skin contact and exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life," she urged.



• Dr Brightson (seated middle) with some dignitaries at the launch of Breastfeeding Week