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Editorial

Comments on the new WHO guidelines for the prevention and management of acute malnutrition in young children

Swati Jain[1] and Ted Greiner[2]

[1] Consultant, Indian Council of Medical Research,New Delhi, India, [2] Editor, World Nutrition

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Correspondence: swati.jain.g@gmail.com

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With the release of its new guideline on the prevention and management of wasting and nutritional oedema (acute malnutrition) (WHO, 2023), WHO is furthering the global fight against acute malnutrition in children under the age of five. This significant achievement represents a critical solution to the ongoing global problem of acute malnutrition, which impacts millions of children globally.

The world pledged to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with the lofty goal of eradicating malnutrition in all of its manifestations by 2030 (United Nations, 2023). Nevertheless, in spite of these pledges, the percentage of children suffering from acute malnutrition has continued to rise alarmingly, impacting an estimated 45 million children under five globally in 2022 (UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank, 2023). The need for revised normative guidelines to assist governments in the prevention and management of acute malnutrition was acknowledged by the Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting (WHO, 2020). In response to this call to action, WHO has now created a thorough guideline with evidence-based recommendations and statements of good practice that will be accompanied later by implementation guidelines and resources.

With a focus on the continuum of care to deliver the best services possible for children and their families, we foresee that this guideline helps countries prevent and manage acute malnutrition. WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus correctly indicated that there is a need for initiation of more integration of nutrition services into health systems and the strengthening of those health systems. This is a more thorough strategy than in the past for dealing with the intricate problem of acute malnutrition in children.

This is the first WHO guideline focusing on both prevention and management of acute malnutrition and highlights the vital importance of investing in both these aspects to have real impact on reducing the prevalence and negative impacts of acute malnutrition on children and their families around the world. Key recommendations of the guideline focus on the following: the child-centred approach; caring for mothers and their infants as an interdependent pair; breastfeeding and access to nutrient-dense home diets as critical components of both prevention and management; and the important role community health workers can play in providing evidence-based care for children with acute malnutrition.

WHO is engaging closely on GAP on Child Wasting with UNICEF and other UN agencies to create practical operational guidelines that will aid in the implementation of the guideline by policy makers, program managers, and health professionals. Further, in order to define and prioritize a research agenda, this will be done in conjunction with seasoned practitioners, program managers, and academicians by means of the official UNICEF-WHO Technical Advisory Group.

Further planned initiatives and current regional and national workshops aim to involve a wide range of actors in discussing how WHO can assist member states and implementing partners in customizing this global guideline to their unique contexts for effective implementation and impact. Sachdev and Kurpad (2024) have discussed the possible practical guidance gaps in energy requirements for South Asian children, pointing out that some modifications to the guidelines may be needed in some settings.

We are pleased with all these efforts and hope they will help steer both countries and the global donor community toward more holistic solutions and away from the "magic bullet" approach of focusing almost exclusively on the use of commercial products, especially those with components that usually need to be imported, such as RUTF (ready to use therapeutic food).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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