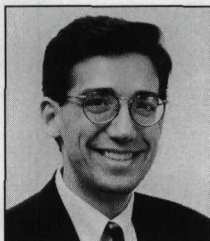


# HELPING BABIES GROW NORMALLY

## *Project Teaches Guatemalan Mothers About the Importance of Infant Nutrition*

BY DAN COLLINS



*Mr. Collins is senior manager, media relations, Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore.*

A peace accord signed in December 1996 finally ended more than 35 years of civil war in Guatemala. Even so, healthcare remains inadequate for many people in that country, especially for poor women and their children. Problems range from inadequate nutrition to respiratory and gastrointestinal infectious diseases.

To help address these issues, Peter Gyves, MD, a pediatrician at Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore, created a maternal-child health intervention program in Guatemala. The program teaches poor women the importance of good nutrition for themselves and their babies, the value of breast-feeding, and the basic skills involved in preventing infectious disease. The program also shows mothers how to monitor their infants' growth during the first six months of life.

### LAUNCHING THE PROGRAM

To secure the necessary funding, Gyves drafted a grant proposal that explained the program's purpose and objectives and included:

- A needs assessment
- An estimate of the personnel it would require
- A description of the methods it would employ
- A system for evaluating its effectiveness

In addition, Gyves submitted a three-year strategic plan to sustain the program.

In 1998 grants were obtained from the Mercy Mission Fund of the Sisters of Mercy, Baltimore Regional Community, and the Genentec Foundation for Growth and Development, Charlottesville, VA. The program was launched in January 1998. In March 1998 the Mercy Mission Fund agreed to fund the program for a second year (to date, it has given the program a total of \$51,200). In addition, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Baltimore and Mankato Provinces, have


recently given the program \$6,500 to be used to support University of Maryland medical students while they spend some time in Guatemala working in the program.

Since the program was launched, approximately 30 Guatemalan "healthcare promoters"—local women who demonstrate leadership qualities—have been taught how to use basic indicators to monitor an infant's growth, as well as to promote the importance of nutrition for women and their children, emphasizing the need for breast-feeding during early life. In particular, the healthcare promoters are taught to watch children for evidence of "stunting" (growth deficits caused by poor nutrition or infection) and "wasting" (weight loss or inadequate weight gain). The healthcare promoters will soon get training in the importance of preventing infectious disease.

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"We encourage all mothers to breast-feed their infants," Gyves said. In one part of the program, 120 breast-feeding women were shown how to add a small amount of zinc to their infants' diets. Preliminary data indicates that this regimen has improved the children's height and weight.

The maternal-child health program is presented in collaboration with the Center for Studies of Sensory Impairment, Aging and Metabolism in Guatemala City, Guatemala. That part of the program which involves teaching mothers about children's health is being incorporated in the new School of Health Sciences at the Universidad Rafael Landivar, the Jesuit university in Guatemala. The school plans to form a group of trainers to carry Gyves' program to other Guatemalan communities. □

 For more information on the maternal-child health project, contact Peter Gyves, MD, 410-332-9351.

### PHYSICIAN TO BE HONORED

Peter Gyves, MD, will receive the 1999 Xavier Award in recognition of his service to the people of Central America and to the Jesuit ministry in the region.

The award, from the Jesuit Seminary and Mission Bureau of New York City, will be presented in a ceremony planned for November 5.