

NEW CENTER PROMOTES Healthy Mothers and Children

BY LINDA KASTLEMAN

Dr. Miriam Labbok, professor of the practice of public health and director of the Center for

Infant and Young Child Feeding and Care, fills the room with vibrancy and passion for the work she has come here to do.



Dr. Miriam Labbok

“Research shows that nature had it right—mothers and babies are healthier when breastfeeding happens,” she says. “It is the single most effective intervention for improving the lives of infants and toddlers in developed countries and saving children’s lives around the world.”

It was “serendipity, or maybe a blessed confluence” that brought Labbok to the School’s Department of Maternal and Child Health, she says. With a Doctor of Medicine and a Master of Public Health from Tulane University, Labbok had worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development and had been on the faculty at Johns Hopkins and Georgetown universities. She was working in mother and child health at UNICEF just as the Center was being formed.

Funded through a generous gift from a North Carolina family (who wanted to remain anonymous), the new Center is focused on three primary goals:

- ◆ Compiling the evidence for good infant and child feeding and care through translational and epidemiological research;
- ◆ Using that evidence in social and political arenas to support policies and programs that benefit mothers and children; and
- ◆ Training future maternal and child health leaders.

Already, the Center is addressing these goals. It was a collaborator in developing the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services report, “Promoting, Protecting and Supporting Breastfeeding: A North Carolina Blueprint for Action,” online at www.nutritionnc.com/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-ncActionPlan.htm. The Center also presented its first annual scholarship award in April 2006 to master’s student Sheryl Wallin Abrahams, who spent the summer in Washington, D.C., creating a sustainability assessment plan for an infant feeding program in Bolivia.

Labbok would like to see a true breastfeeding “norm” developed in North Carolina and around the world—something that will happen naturally, she believes, “when, as a society, we ensure that families are enabled to make educated, unbiased choices about the feeding and care of their young children and when we can institute the healthcare, workplace and social support necessary for giving our children the best possible start on life.”

She praises several colleagues for their vision and support, including Dr. Herbert Peterson, chair of the Department of Maternal and Child Health; Mary Rose Tully, director of lactation services at Women’s and Children’s Hospitals at UNC and instrumental in the creation of the breast milk bank at the WakeMed Health Care System in 1992; Greg Duyck, associate director of corporate and foundation relations for health affairs at UNC; and Marcia Roth, director of planning and development in the School’s Department of Maternal and Child Health.

“It is such an honor to be associated with this effort,” Labbok says. “My colleagues are extraordinary. The members of the donor family lend insights and energy to our efforts here. There is no better location than the UNC School of Public Health, which is already widely recognized for its service and advocacy.” ■

From left: Marcia Roth, Dr. Miriam Labbok and Dr. Herbert Peterson discuss the upcoming activities of the School’s new Center for Infant and Young Child Feeding and Care.



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