

Little Kajal Now Has the Chance to Regain Her Weight

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One will not be surprised to see small children like Kajal having malnutrition and the severe form of it even. Her mother, Fakhryiah, is only 21 years old yet she is nursing her sixth baby. Pale and weak as expected from a mother delivered only one week ago, Fakhryiah has brought Kajal because “ she has grown very weak and slim lately” as she said. It is really adventurous to mothers in her situation to take that risk but “ their father is busy, my oldest child is only nine and I have no one else to do it.” Fakhryia replied to a question as why she brought the child.

Apart from the newborn this illiterate young mother should take care of five more kids aged between 9 and two. Actually she was a child only when she married, and one could easily imagine through what tough experience she might have being going before she could learn nursing, washing, cooking and managing other household needs of her rapidly increasing economically disadvantaged family. And the father who is a worker, expectedly could have hardly the time and moods to assist in this hard endeavor.

Kajal is not the newborn as you may expect. No she has passed her second birthday one month ago, of course unnoticeably like most children of this region. Najeeba, one of the nurses in charge of growth monitoring unit in Azadi Health Center in Erbil Northern Iraq asked the mother for the child's health card.

“Is it the first time you bring her?” She asked the mother. “ She seems very slim.” She continued while noting down the child's name and age in her register book.

“No, previously she was not bad, only she had a bout of diarrhea 2 weeks ago. She had it for one week.” Replied the mother holding her daughter's hand and trying to sit on a chair.

“Come on my dear, let me put you over there, in that trolley.” Said the nurse approaching Kajal and trying to put her in the weighing scale on the table. The pathetic girl, with an eye on her mother who gave her a push on the back, surrendered without resistance.

“She is 9.5 kilos,” said the nurse adjusting the reading bud on the scale. “ She has hardly the weight of a one year old child. That means she is moderately malnourished or as we say minus 2.” She continued. “ She should be enrolled in the programme of supplementary feeding.” Said Najeeba explaining to me. “ Mother, your child is very weak we will tell you what to do,” she continued addressing Fakhryia.

Sargul, the other nurse took a form out of her drawers and told the mother “ now you tell me some information to fill in this form.”

“ Could you please just show me what sort of information is recorded in that form?” I asked the nurse.

She showed me the form and explained. The first part was information about the child's name, age, sex, address etc. The second part was to record weight and supplied biscuits on weekly basis for 4 weeks after which the child is supposed to be discharged from the programme or if still not cured would be referred to a Nutrition Rehabilitation Center. The 3rd part contained some questions on previous diseases, type of feeding, breast milk, mother's literacy, water source etc. The last part of

the form was monthly follow up of the cured child. It was really a great form covering all relevant and needed information about the child.

The form was filled, then the mother was handed high protein biscuits enough for one week.

“ Mother, you give these biscuits as well as food like soup, eggs, rice, vegetables to your child. Then you come next Sunday. She should gain at least 100 grams. Then we give you the same amount for the other week. And so on till one month.” She continued. “ You should try your best to feed her properly and cure your child other wise if she remains the same we will refer her to the hospital.” She concluded.

Malnutrition of under 5 years children is one of the most alarming challenges for UNICEF and health authorities in Northern Iraq. According to 1999 survey 19% of the age group have chronic malnutrition (low height for age) and 15% are under weight (low weight for age). Such percentages make a substantial part of the under 5 population in the North which is supposed to be over half a million. As a response to this grave situation, which cumulatively developed from early nineties after imposition of sanction on the country, UNICEF tried to systematize growth-monitoring practices in the health system. From July 1997 till July 1999 growth monitoring units have been established in 280 primary health centers out of 400 active in the region. In consultation with local authorities, necessary training of the staff and equipping are supported by UNICEF as well as provision of therapeutic milk and high protein biscuits. This diverse system along with hospital based *Nutrition Rehabilitation Centers* and village based *Community Child Care Units*, also introduced and supported by UNICEF, has made growth monitoring of over 50,000 under 5 children possible every month. While it is a great achievement in monitoring children for malnutrition, yet UNICEF and local authorities are still more ambitious aiming at regular monthly checking of 100,000 children which is 20% of the total under 5 population, an objective which by no means does seem to be over realistic.

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