

UNICEF report a sad commentary on state's health record

By A Staff Reporter

AHMEDABAD: Around 53 per cent of children in Gujarat, below five years of age, are undernourished. The infant mortality rate (IMR) is around 60. More than 60 per cent of the women within reproductive age and 70 per cent of children in the 1-2 age group are anaemic.

These were some of the startling figures which were given by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) state representative for Gujarat, Yogendra Mathur, here on Wednesday. He was addressing the press on the occasion of release of the 'State of World's Children Report 2001', published by UNICEF.

He said despite the government spending on a large number of child health care programmes like immunisation against various diseases, the infant mortality rate in Gujarat was stagnant at around 60 over the last five years. "The area which actually needs to be focused under these circumstances is childbirth," he said.

Mathur said, "More than 40 per cent of childbirth in the state are

supervised by untrained midwives, an issue which requires to be addressed to reduce the IMR to a minimum of 50 in the next five years."

UNICEF's latest report emphasises on "Early Childhood Care", apart from providing necessary obstetric knowledge which utilises "the available household resources" for optimum survival, growth and development of children.

Mathur said, "UNICEF visualises that time before birth and then the first three years of life are the most vital period for development of a child." During this phase, brain growth is most rapid and therefore good nutrition and rich experiences help in the better development of brain and overall growth, he said. "About 40 per cent of adult mental ability is formed during this period," he added.

While only breast-feeding takes care of the entire nourishment around the fourth to sixth months, a child between nine months and one year of age "should be fed four to six times a day in addition to mother's milk".

The UNICEF report which asks nations to "invest in child care to ensure a productive future", further underscores the need of micro-nutrients like vitamins for a healthy child and adequate iron to prevent anaemia during young age. Apart from emphasising on warm and responsive interactions for psycho-social development, it also discusses the need for prompt recognition of danger signals of pneumonia and diarrhoea.

The study, conducted by UNICEF among 3,000 adolescent girls in Vadodara from rural, urban and tribal backgrounds, has shown 76 per cent suffer from anaemia. "This again is an important area which requires attention for better child care," says Siddharth Nirupam of UNICEF. During pregnancy, the entire resource of iron is transferred to the child in the womb. "This is a concern for both mother and child as not only an anaemic mother unable to provide the required amount of the element to the growing child, but the woman also runs out of the element," said Nirupam.