

# ESTABLISHING THE FIRST HUMAN MILK BANK IN VIET NAM



In the Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children

## Why human milk banks?

Newborn babies need the best care possible to survive and thrive, including one of the most sophisticated personalized medicines available: human breastmilk. Breastmilk fosters strength, a healthy metabolism, good digestion, a robust immune system, and many more positive outcomes. No factory-produced product can support immediate survival, short-term gains, or lifelong benefits in the same way.

In addition to supporting ideal growth and development for all breastfed babies, the scientific journal *The Lancet* estimates that optimal breastfeeding practices worldwide could prevent more than 820,000 deaths in children under five every year.\*

However, not all women are able to use their own breastmilk to feed their newborns; reasons include being too sick to breastfeed or taking medication that is not recommended while breastfeeding. In these instances, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends providing donor human milk to ensure access to the benefits of breastmilk that help save newborn lives (see Graphic 1).

Human milk banks screen, collect, process, and distribute donor human breastmilk to promote optimal infant health for pre-term infants and orphans, and in other cases where mothers are unable to breastfeed. Milk is donated by volunteer breastfeeding mothers, after which it is processed, stored, and distributed safely to provide safe, high-quality donor milk and meet the needs of newborns at-risk of malnutrition.

Today, without a single human milk bank in the country, infants in Viet Nam do not have access to this life-saving intervention. Increasing awareness regarding the benefits of donor milk, establishing supportive policies, and integrating human milk banks into health systems are important steps towards ensuring access to safe donor human milk for infants who need it most.

## Human milk bank pilot in Da Nang

Over the past several years, The Da Nang Department of Health has improved community awareness and promotion of breastfeeding practices and early essential newborn care; today, they are helping to launch and run Viet Nam's first human milk bank at the Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children. Of 15,000 deliveries annually, an estimated 3,000 - 4,000 newborns are at risk and would benefit immensely from access to donor human milk. At-risk newborns include those born underweight, premature, or with serious illness. The Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children is currently receiving financial and technical support from Alive & Thrive and PATH to pilot this groundbreaking facility and lay the foundation for other similar institutions across the country. This cooperative project is supported by two donors: Alive & Thrive is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and PATH receives funding from the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation.

\* In the 75 countries where 95% of under 5 deaths occur.

**Graphic 1: WHO ranking of feeding options for at-risk newborns**



## Project Goals:

- ✓ To establish a human milk bank in the Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children to improve access to donor human breastmilk for 3,000 - 4,000 at-risk infants annually
- ✓ To provide a basis for developing national human milk bank guidelines and establishing a human milk bank network throughout the country



PATH will train health staff to test, pasteurize, store, and track donated milk, ensuring the breastmilk is safe to feed to at-risk newborns. Alive & Thrive will train doctors and nurses in the postnatal and neonatal wards to encourage breastfeeding mothers to donate excess milk to the bank, and how to prescribe donor human milk to at-risk infants whose mothers cannot breastfeed. Health staff from throughout the hospital will also receive training from Alive & Thrive on the importance of breastfeeding and the human milk bank. Additionally, Alive & Thrive plans to develop a communications campaign to raise awareness about the human milk bank's purpose, encourage potential breastmilk donors, and create demand for donor human milk among those who need it. Once operational, the human milk bank will be an integral part of newborn care within the Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children.

Data will be collected by the hospital and with initial support from Alive & Thrive, at all steps of the process to ensure the human milk bank is operating effectively. This monitoring data will also indicate whether the human milk bank is recruiting enough donors to meet the demand for donor milk - a key to the success of this pilot. In addition, a costing study to be conducted by Alive & Thrive will examine the cost per recipient of donor human milk and the overall cost of establishing this human milk bank. This will help the Ministry of Health plan for human milk banks in other hospitals across Viet Nam.

In addition to improving access to donor breastmilk for 3,000 - 4,000 at-risk children annually, the experience in Da Nang will demonstrate the feasibility of the approach and serve as a starting point for developing national human milk bank guidelines and establishing a human milk bank network throughout the country, with the potential to save thousands of lives.

### Infants who benefit from a human milk bank

- ✓ Pre-term
- ✓ Low birth weight
- ✓ Born to HIV-positive mothers who opt out, or are unable to breastfeed
- ✓ Severely malnourished
- ✓ Orphans
- ✓ Unable to suckle

*Alive & Thrive is an initiative to save lives, prevent illness, and ensure healthy growth and development through improved breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices. Alive & Thrive is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the governments of Canada and Ireland. The initiative is managed by FHI 360.*

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