



Programmatic Case Study No 1

The Wellstart Associate Network

Overview

One of the most valuable outcomes of Wellstart's Lactation Management Education (LME) Program has been the international network of Wellstart Associates (LME Program participants) that has been developing and expanding since 1983. The growing network of Associates currently consists of more than 600 health professionals from 55 countries (not including those in the U.S.) who are working to promote optimal infant feeding and maternal health and nutrition. The pediatricians, obstetrician-gynecologists, midwives, nurses, nutritionists, and other high-level health care workers that make up this international network occupy leadership positions in their governments, universities, and communities. Because they are teachers and leaders, they are able to share their knowledge, skills, and commitment to breastfeeding with many others.

In addition to the comprehensive education and technical support provided directly by the LME Program, the Wellstart Associates are able to draw from — and contribute to — a common well of information, support, and motivation from the network at large. Associates are involved in national, regional, and global meetings. They exchange ideas, experiences, and materials, and forge links with colleagues with similar interests. They are also called upon as educational and technical resources in small local projects as well as global efforts such as the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative assessments. Such activities provide the Associates with opportunities to share their expertise as well as increase their experience.

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It is difficult to fully measure the value of the collaborative relationships within the Associate Network. However, collaboration among Associates has clearly enhanced their ability to provide high-quality education and training, enabled them to share information and materials, and sustained motivation and momentum. The Associate Network ensures that breastfeeding promotion efforts will continue well beyond the scope of the original LME Program, and for as long as this valuable resource is nurtured.

Development and Utilization of the Associate Network

When the LME Program began, it became clear that the participants were more than “graduates” upon completion of the LME entry course. The bonds the participants formed among themselves and with Wellstart, sustained through ongoing communication, follow-up, and collaboration, had a definite influence on the quality and quantity of the breastfeeding promotion work these health professionals carried out in the field.

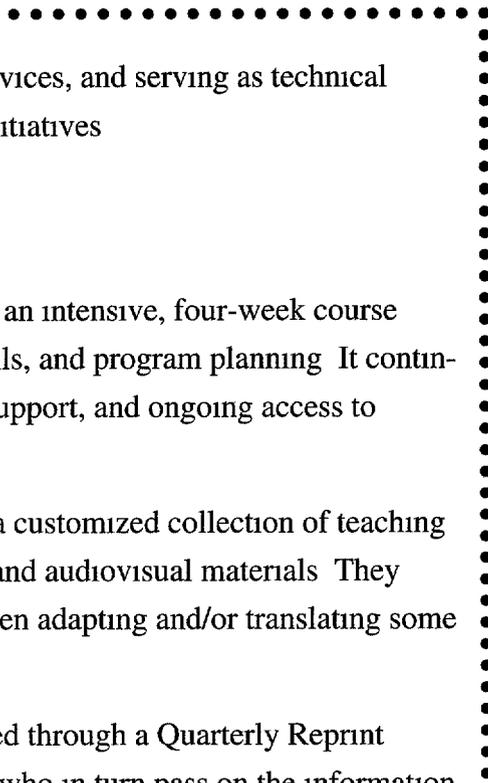
As more participants entered the LME Program and the scope of interactions increased, it became apparent that a different term was needed to describe LME alumni” and the network they represented. The terms “Associate” and

“Associate Network” more accurately described the nature of this ongoing relationship.

The Network has grown in complexity, working on different levels and consisting of individuals, multidisciplinary teams, and even smaller networks within the whole. The network is strengthened by informal alliances as well as formal support through technical assistance and information sharing. As Associates develop their expertise, they are called upon to assist and represent Wellstart and other organizations such as WHO and UNICEF. Associates around the world are currently providing training and technical assistance in a variety of settings,



Photo: Wellstart



improving preservice curricula and clinical services, and serving as technical experts for related maternal and child health initiatives

Continuing Education

Participation in the LME Program begins with an intensive, four-week course focusing on scientific foundations, clinical skills, and program planning. It continues with field-based technical assistance and support, and ongoing access to current scientific and technical information.

- LME course participants are provided with a customized collection of teaching materials that includes texts, teaching aids, and audiovisual materials. They continue to use these materials for years, often adapting and/or translating some of them for wider use.
- Current technical information is disseminated through a Quarterly Reprint Program to key Associates in each country, who in turn pass on the information to their fellow Associates. Wellstart also responds to Associates' individual requests for up-to-date information.
- A variety of in-country technical assistance visits are provided. For example, visits can focus on clinical skills, national program plans, or curriculum reform.
- Wellstart encourages Associate participation in international breastfeeding and related conferences by ensuring that they receive information about upcoming events. In some cases, Wellstart has been able to provide financial support for Associates to attend such meetings as Wellstart representatives, or has coordinated their participation with other organizations such as UNICEF and WHO.
- Opportunities for individual Advanced Study Fellowships have been available to Associates with leadership roles in developing programs in their institutions, countries, or regions.

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Communications, Networking, and Information Sharing

Whether representing Wellstart, their own institutions, or other health organizations, Associates continue to have an identity as members of the Associate Network. While some Associates maintain loose connections due to distance and time constraints, others have formed strong "mini-networks" within their regions and have established working groups that have continued to prosper even after the

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founding members have moved on to other work. Some Associates were already working together before entering the LME Program and, in fact, applied to the Program in order to strengthen their abilities as a team. Wellstart lays the groundwork for continued communication and support within the network in a variety of ways.

- Each LME course participant receives a full list of names and contact information for all of the Associates worldwide and is encouraged to make use of these colleagues as resources for their current and future work. Associate lists are also shared with collaborating projects and agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, WABA, BASICS, etc.
- In-country technical assistance visits by Wellstart faculty or senior Associates provide an opportunity for Associates and their colleagues to come together as cohesive groups with common interests, and often serve to renew the bonds among busy professionals.
- In 1992 and again in 1995, Wellstart Associates collaborated to produce Country Status Reports containing data on breastfeeding activities within their countries. The Reports, which are available now for 38 countries, contain a list of current Wellstart Associates as well as information about country breastfeeding background, Associate activities, National Breastfeeding Program and Center development, future activities and needs, and documents available. The reports have been widely distributed to other countries and to interested individuals and organizations.
- Wellstart has helped in disseminating course curricula developed in countries such as Cameroon, Mexico, Kenya and Pakistan. For example, a course developed in Mexico in collaboration with Wellstart faculty members and local Associates has also been used in several other Latin countries, and the curriculum developed by the Cameroonian Associates has been shared with teams from other French-speaking countries.
- Wellstart's *Lactation Management Curriculum: A Faculty Guide for Schools of Medicine, Nursing and Nutrition* was developed through a series of workshops with Associates from the U.S. and then revised by Associates from several Latin American and African countries. Not only did the value of local experience and expertise make the *Guide* a more practical tool for a variety of settings, but the Associates also learned much from the development process.
- Wellstart Associates have been involved as field-testers and Master Trainers/Assessors since the beginning of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI),

and many have continued to work on expanding the effort into locally appropriate projects such as Baby Friendly Universities and Baby Friendly Clinics Kenyan Associates participated in field-testing of the WHO/Wellstart Course for Hospital Administrators and Policy-Makers and, in Chile, Associates have developed a BFHI Clinic Assessment Tool that is currently being shared with other countries

- Regional congresses in Asia and Latin America have provided an opportunity for Associates to update their knowledge and skills, to share their experiences with other participating countries, and to reinvigorate their commitment Because these congresses included all Associates and at least two national-level policy makers from each country, effective national- and regional-level program planning was possible In several cases, the congresses offered the first opportunity for Associates from different institutions within the same country to work together as a coordinated, functional team

Use of Associates as Technical Consultants

Wellstart encourages and facilitates the use of Associates as technical resources, for “south-south” exchanges, and as organizational representatives

- A growing number of projects and organizations are utilizing Associates as advisors or technical consultants For example, several Associates were used as Resident Advisors by Wellstart’s Expanded Promotion of Breastfeeding (EPB) Program, UNICEF has hired several Associates as national or regional BFHI Coordinators, Associates have functioned as TAG members for a number of programs including Wellstart’s LME and EPB Programs and are functioning as technical staff of the BASICS Project they have also been used as principal investigators for research projects (LAC/HNS) and as Master Trainers and Assessors for the BFHI



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- A number of Associates, including the seventeen Advanced Study Fellows, have maintained an especially strong relationship with Wellstart over

The multidisciplinary network transcends cultural, language and professional boundaries with its relatively singular focus.

the years. Several return regularly to San Diego from other countries to teach sessions during the LME Program entry course.

- Senior Associates and Advanced Study Fellows from countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been called upon to participate as technical advisors on follow-up field visits to a variety of other countries. Site visits have also been arranged, allowing Associates at different levels of experience and growth to showcase accomplishments, and to share lessons learned and problem-solving strategies.

Lessons Learned and Challenges for the Future

Fostering Development of Local Expertise

- *Working through Associates ensures a true field-based approach.* Rather than offering “blueprints,” educational tools and support should be provided to assist the Associates as they carry out culturally appropriate programs in their own languages and settings. The Associates themselves are best able to determine how to apply what they learn.
- *Flexible, prototype tools and program outlines lend themselves well to exchange.* They give the Associates the opportunity to learn how to identify and articulate their specific needs, while allowing them to adapt educational materials rather than having to invent them. The sense of ownership resulting from the infusion of local experience and expertise contributes to the effectiveness of the tools and the process as a whole.

Communication, Networking, and Information Sharing

- *Continual exchange between health professionals with similar interests in optimal infant feeding helps maintain enthusiasm and momentum.* The multidisciplinary network transcends cultural, language, and professional boundaries with its relatively singular focus.
- *Ideas and materials are very adaptable.* Within the Network and elsewhere, sharing of information must be encouraged and facilitated to avoid duplication.

of effort Translation is necessary to the exchange of information, and funding for translation is a good investment Technical information may be better translated by subject matter experts than professional translators, and technical translations should at least be reviewed by an expert

- *There is a need to keep up with information technology* As the size and scope of the Associate Network grows, it will be increasingly important to make use of advances in e-mail and internet technology to communicate more often and to reach larger numbers of people, networks, and institutions in order to share information as effectively and rapidly as possible
- *“Marketing” of the network, and of the LME Program’s philosophy of educating the educators for a far-reaching effect, should be a priority* Wellstart and the Associates must increase the effectiveness of efforts to publicize the work accomplished and its impact, in order to continue to receive acknowledgment and funding for these efforts Although the cost-effectiveness of the “multiplier” effect is well-known, more needs to be done to publicize the many successes that would not have been possible without the strength of a collegial network, as well as to promote the education approach itself as a means of effecting sustainable change
- *Networking takes time, resources, and ongoing maintenance to maximize potential* Active coordination, communication, continuing education, and information sharing are necessary in order to transform a loosely connected group of professionals into a productive network of Associates, subnetworks, and affiliate institutions These efforts are what binds the Network together and provides the impetus and motivation for continued success

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Use of Associates as Technical Consultants

- *Use of Associates as organizational representatives or as technical consultants results in multiple beneficial outcomes* Not only do such activities result in the successful completion of the task at hand, but they provide Associates with continuing education and increased experience as well
- *The abilities of the Associates should be developed* Wellstart and other organizations benefit from the contributions of



Photo Wellstart

the experts available within the network, and therefore it is important to cultivate the Associates' abilities as well as their reputations as qualified experts. Rather than choosing to use external consultants who might be stronger initially, it is preferable to use the skills of the Associates whenever possible, thereby strengthening their abilities and creating sustainable local resources for long-term impact. Learning to work within international consultancies and political structures, or to debrief and write reports, etc., will also enable Associates to better promote themselves beyond their own institutions.

- *International consultancies require financial strategies* Organizational policies can lead to equity problems in compensation for consultants from developing countries. For example, USAID regulations prohibit paying consultant fees to government employees, comparatively low consultant rates may not provide adequate compensation to physicians away from their clinical practices, inequity between the economies of developed and developing countries leads to disparities in rates of pay. Use of honoraria and other forms of compensation can help in some cases.
- *Ongoing support is needed for Network maintenance* Wellstart continues to work to facilitate communication and collaboration between Associates and other organizations with similar interests and goals because we believe that the Network is much greater than the sum of its members. The Network is an extraordinary resource for long-term and effective promotion, protection, and support efforts for optimal maternal and infant health and nutrition. It would truly be a loss if this rich and synergistic resource was left to disperse due to lack of attention.



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