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Mwakyusa stresses healthy infant feeding

By **ABDULWAKIL SAIBOKO**

THE government is committed in emphasising breastfeeding and fortification of processed foods, in a bid to curb malnutrition among children aged less than five years whose death rate has been pegged at 43,000 per annum.

The Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Prof David Mwakyusa, told the 'Daily News' in Dar es Salaam yesterday that six months' exclusive breastfeeding and addition of micronutrients in processed foods could help reduce the deaths.

"We have been all along checking food ingredients to ensure better quality for our people. In fact, we are vigilant in protecting our people against health hazards," he said.

Prof Mwakyusa was commenting on a presentation yesterday which was made at a meeting convened by the World Bank in Dar es Salaam.

The presenter claimed that Tanzania has lost 600,000 children aged less than five years in the past decade and that another 43,000 would die this year because of malnutrition.

Food fortification is the public health policy of adding micronutrients (essential trace elements and vitamins) to foodstuffs, to ensure that minimum dietary requirements are met.

The minister was, however, hesitant to agree on the data saying, "It should be noted that malnutrition does not kill but it could lead to death as affected individuals or children's bodies become less resistant to diseases

and can easily die when they fall sick.

"I am, however, not sure of the indicated numbers, he said." Prof Mwakyusa urged families to help mothers accomplish the recommended six months of exclusive breastfeeding, as doing so reduces deaths related to malnutrition among children.

The Tanzania Bureau of Standards (TBS) Chief Standard Officer, Faustine Masaga, noted that the bureau was working on the fortification standards and that the process would be completed by June, this year.

"We have received the WHO standard and different standards from 27 other developing and developed countries, but we want to determine our own standard that will put into consideration the factors which are unique in our country," he said.

Mr Masaga noted that the factors to be considered include nature of packaging, transportation and distribution processes which in one way or the other can lead to loss of nutrients.

Mr Masaga, however, noted that some producers have started to voluntarily fortify their products in accordance with either standards set by WHO or borrowed from one of the neighbouring countries.

The paper presenter, who is the manager of a non-governmental organisation - Uwazi Twaweza, Mr Hans Hoogeveen, said that the number of deaths was established from the Lancet Magazine Survey done last year, which indicates that children in the county die every 12 minutes from malnutrition.

"Malnutrition causes death, but rarely because children starve.