Host: It is my pleasure to welcome in our In Town section my guests Dr. Sara Moukarzel, Researcher in nutritional sciences and Dr. Antoine Farhat, Dean of the Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences at Notre Dame University. Welcome!

We are talking about an ongoing project in collaboration with an American University, the University of California San Diego. Perhaps one of the main goals of your work is to raise awareness around the topic of breastfeeding. How did your project start and does it stem from a certain need?

Sara: For sure! First off, good morning and thank you for hosting us! This need stems from a major problem that we face not only in the Lebanese society but also in communities around the world. As you know, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends infants be exclusively breastfed, meaning without any other source of fluid or food, for the first 6 months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding with food till 2 years and beyond if possible. But there are many social barriers against this happening in Lebanon and perhaps we need to dedicate a separate episode just to discuss that.

Host: Are the barriers social or perhaps also something else like psychological and economy-related?

Sara: You are right. The barriers are so many, some of it is economy-related, some related to government laws that are either breastfeeding-supportive or not, but if we think of the Lebanese context, how frequently do we hear stories like this?: “a mother being forced to breastfeed her child in the toilet because she cannot do that in public and because people would laugh at her?” The society can be quite unjust when it comes to that.

Host: Or simply the society is not equipped [to support breastfeeding]. Public spaces are not equipped to support breastfeeding. And now we are starting to see a few breastfeeding rooms in a few malls.

Sara: At least that’s a start! But the need is also because we [as a society] don’t receive medical information about breastfeeding that reaches the person accurately. There are so many examples of how misconceptions are spread on Facebook and by word of mouth.

Host: We will try to talk about these today as much as the time allows us. But Dr. Farhat, how important is it to have collaborations with international renowned universities in doing this kind of work? What is the added value?
**Antoine:** These collaborations are a must. The world has become one big city and that’s a good thing, especially when it comes to funding these projects. While funding is available in Lebanon, it is incomparable to that in more economically-advanced countries. What helped us in our case was having Dr. Moukarzel, who is our alumna and who then left to the US on a scholarship. She has become our link with the University of California San Diego. We also need their expertise which is made possible by collaborating with the Center Sara is affiliated with [The Larsson-Rosenquist Foundation Mother-Milk-Infant Center of Research Excellence]. This made possible working on an important topic [breastfeeding education] that has been highlighted in Lebanon but not depth thereby having various implications including economic ones which you have mentioned earlier.

**Host:** Right! [Let’s talk about] the actual work that you are doing. How are you able to reach communities in Lebanon? Are you focused only on university students? How are you able to do this work?

**Sara:** Our idea started with a very big question: What if we can raise the next generation to be supportive of breastfeeding? And what better place to do this than to start in the schools?

**Host:** So you are targeting schools not universities?

**Sara:** Indeed we start in schools!

**Host:** Wow!

**Sara:** Indeed. And people may say “we have enough to learn about in school” and “what else do you want us to teach our kids”. That’s why the first phases of our project focused on going to the schools and talking to more than 200 teachers and 700 students to figure out whether they want to learn more about breastfeeding, how we should teach about it and in which classes we can do that? Additionally, if we teach about it in class, would that be enough? Or should we think of ways where the student becomes a spokesperson [about breastfeeding] in his/her home and then in his/her community?

**Host:** So now it becomes the student’s role to explain to his/her parents.

**Sara:** exactly! So we are creating ambassadors that spread [the word] first in the communities and then across the country as a whole. That’s why we are so excited to be pursing this innovative idea to solve the problem.

**Host:** and we’ve been seeing [on the TV screen] a few slides further explaining your concept. Till when are you doing this project?

**Sara:** We’ve been working on this project for 2 years and we’re at a point where next steps will involve engaging the parents as partners and the final step is to incorporate this information in the curriculum.
Host: the school curriculum.

Sara: Yes

Host: wow

Antoine: and let’s not forget that the students we are talking about are the next generation of parents themselves.

Host: yeah. Why are you not also working on this at the university level? Do they need such awareness as well?

Antoine: Yes but the impact will be much bigger in this approach [targeting the younger ones] especially that they will be the next generation of parents. We might expand this at later stages to university students.

Sara: No doubts about it. But as they say in Arabic “ Early education is like carving in stone”. So if we can start at a younger age, even though this is much more challenging, then why not? Of course the challenge is to make sure the topic is made relevant to a younger student...to understand “ why are you educating me about this”. But what if we are able to make this topic [breastfeeding] normal? Just like anything [we teach] like [how] to eat a banana, play outside, like the trees [nature] and respect others. Similarly, breastfeeding is something normal and should be seen as normal in the society.

Host: Of course! Especially that the impact of this work will be very multi-dimensional. [Dr. Farhat] you mentioned that Sara was your student and you are still in good contact. Is this how you work with all students at NDU?

Antoine: We are losing a lot of the values [in our society] that need to be constantly reinforced and at the essence of the reinforcement is the existence of love. This is the spirit we have with our students. And Sara is a clear example of that. She was supported by a well-known scholarship, the Fulbright Scholarship, to travel [continue her education abroad] and at the time, I told her “ you will continue to get your PhD”. We laid out her [career] path and I think it’s happening as we have laid it out. And now she has become the link between NDU and San Diego. Has there not been this [strong] connection with our student, nothing would make her come back to invest her expertise here.

Host: You [as a team] encouraged her to come back

Antoine: Indeed, we did our part.

Host: Had you not done that, we would have lost one more of the brilliant people we unfortunately continue to lose in Lebanon.
**Antoine:** Indeed and if we look back at every one of our success stories, we see at the essence of it is a lot of giving without asking much in return.

**Host:** Yeah. And now [what would you say] if we were to talk briefly about the benefits of breastfeeding during the last few minutes so we can raise awareness among women who are watching and also among the fathers who are watching

**Sara:** and [raising awareness among fathers] is extremely important. What we say about breastfeeding benefits is based on scientific research. And the evidence shows that the benefits are not only to the infant but also to the mother. To the infant, the benefits relate to cognitive development, protecting the infant against infections but also against diabetes and obesity. And to the mother, which is extremely important, breastfeeding protects against breast cancer. And perhaps one of the most important things a mom can do, if she can of course, is to breastfeed.

**Host:** How about the economic benefits?

**Antoine:** The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months and then to 2 years and beyond. So the math is simple of how much savings [instead of buying formula] that would be. On another note, Dr. Moukarzel [and team] is working on improving formula to get it closer to human milk. It will be impossible to compete with what’s natural [breast milk], with the composition of the breast milk which is perfect [to the infant needs]...Therefore [the savings relate to] having the health benefits as best as they can be and not having to pay for formula for at least 6 months, let alone the additional duration after introducing solid foods.

**Host:** An also [this leads to] the prevention from so many diseases.

**Antoine:** Of course. The economic benefits is not only saving money to purchase formula but also health-wise [reduction in health care costs].

**Host:** Are studies showing the protective effect of breastfeeding on disease risk?

**Sara:** Indeed and we are very excited that the benefits seem to extend beyond infancy.

**Host:** Welcome again to our show and we would like to host you in the future to follow up on this and much more. Once again, thank you Dr. Antoine Farhat, Dean of the Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences at Notre Dame University and Dr. Sara Moukarzel, researcher in nutritional sciences.