

Abstract

The discovery that a solution of salt and sugar is an excellent way to treat and prevent dehydration was an important advance in the primary health care field, as it was expected that mothers, even illiterate mothers, could easily learn to prepare the solution at home, thus preventing serious consequences of untreated diarrhea. In addition to the low price, an important quality of this simple solution is that it gives the mother a sense of responsibility and the knowledge that she herself can do much to alleviate the suffering of her children. Unfortunately, the pharmaceutical industry and chemists were quick to realize that big profits can be made from oral rehydration and to package ready-made solutions. Consequently, there has been a movement away from teaching the mother how to make a simple solution at home, using salt, sugar, and water. The responsibility for this situation needs to be shared by both the scientist and the health worker. Scientists seem to have some difficulty accepting the fact that simple can be good and better is not always best. By adding 1.5 grams of potassium chloride or 2.9 grams of trisodium citrate to improve the mixture, it becomes a medicine, which only can be given/prescribed/sold by health personnel or chemists. The improved formula is good in a clinic setting, but in terms of primary health care and self-help this is not the best approach. The solution is being put beyond the reach of the poor child, certainly in the rural areas of the developing world. All health workers should know how to prepare a salt-sugar solution and also should show mothers/parents/caretakers how to make it. If one is serious about primary health care and self-help, it is best to return to using sugar and salt.