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Maternal Perceptions of Healthcare Professional Bias regarding Infant Feeding within the Irish Healthcare System

Abigail Bacon, Eileen C O'Brien, Elizabeth J O'Sullivan

School of Biological, Health, and Sports Sciences, Technological University Dublin

Aim

To explore maternal perceptions of bias from healthcare professionals (HCPs) regarding infant feeding within the Irish healthcare system

Background

The World Health Organization recommends exclusively breastfeeding for the 1st six months of life, and continued breastfeeding to two years or beyond¹.

However, formula feeding is the predominant method of infant feeding in Ireland², being deeply embedded in Irish culture³.

Formula is more prevalent and accessible within Irish Maternity Services in comparison to breastfeeding resources, continuing to perpetuate low breastfeeding rates^{3,4}.

Research Design

Data were pre-collected as part of a 2022 national, online survey that was carried out in collaboration between TU Dublin and Bainne Beatha⁵.

Eligible participants included women who had breastfed or considered breastfeeding infants born in Ireland between 2019-2021.

Relevant qualitative responses were analysed utilising Braun & Clarke's 6 step reflexive thematic analysis framework⁶, using NVivo v.14, from an interpretivist viewpoint.

Results/Discussion

Three themes describing mothers' reported perceptions of HCP bias were developed based on 23,893 comments from 4,695 women:

1: Double-Edged Sword: HCP Breastfeeding Advocacy

Maternal perceptions of HCPs being biased in favour of breastfeeding and against formula feeding, which was considered positive by some but negative by others.

2: Formula First Advice in HCP-Mother Interactions

Maternal perceptions of HCPs being biased against breastfeeding and in favour of formula feeding. This was considered to negatively affect breastfeeding mothers.

3: Systemic Undervaluing of Breastfeeding

Maternal perceptions of the Irish healthcare system (as opposed to individual HCPs) being biased against breastfeeding and in favour of formula feeding. This was considered to negatively affect breastfeeding mothers.

"midwives were superb- very encouraging and helpful. Without them I may not have continued to feed" (BB1614)

"My PHN...told me I was spoiling the baby when I mentioned that I just gave him the boob anytime he cried." (BB2818)

"immense guilt and pressure from professionals." (BB2514)

"I was not given formula when I asked for it despite my baby crying with hunger" (BB2396)

"Midwives are great- but they are incredibly overworked and just dont have the time...and are way too quick to offer formula as a solution." (BB6479)

"you need to be able to pay for good quality private support...to continue breastfeeding" (BB2205)

Double-Edged Sword: HCP Breastfeeding Advocacy

Formula First Advice in HCP-Mother Interactions

Systemic Undervaluing of Breastfeeding

"Gp told me that formula has millions invested in it so must be better." (BB3362)

"Breastfeeding is clearly not valued by lots of midwives and they don't enjoy offering support and advice so recommend formula." (BB4909)

"Breastfeeding is not valued by the Irish healthcare system." (BB1248)

Conclusion

Findings indicate inconsistent HCP attitudes towards infant feeding. Bias, whether for/against breastfeeding or formula feeding, is prevalent and can contribute to maternal dissatisfaction regarding their breastfeeding experience and overall maternity care.

Bias impacts experiences through pressure to change feeding method and reduced support, or conversely, increased support and encouragement when feeding preferences between mothers and HCPs align.

A unified breastfeeding facing approach is required to shift societal attitudes and strengthen breastfeeding support across the Irish healthcare system.

References

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