

INFANT FEEDING DECISIONS AND BREAST FEEDING PRACTICES OF FIRST TIME MOTHERS' IN THE PHILIPPINES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Universalizing the coverage of Infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, particularly optimal breastfeeding practices, as one of the most effective interventions to reduce infant and young child mortality, morbidity and malnutrition have gained increased recognition in recent years (Bentley et al., 1999, Brennan et al., 2004, Buskens et al., 2007, Cattaneo and Quintero-Romero, 2006). Unfortunately, IYCF practices universally are not optimal. Global monitoring shows that only one third of all infants are breastfed exclusively, even when assessment is done in children below the age of 4 months (WHO, 2003, WHO and UNICEF, 2007). This situation applies to many countries within the South East Asia region (SEARO), where many deaths occur as a consequence of sub optimal infant feeding practices. This study aimed at examining those factors that are specific to the Philippines context where limited recent formative research on factors influencing adherence to IYCF recommendations have been conducted.

The Study: This study used a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore; a) the current knowledge about early infant feeding practices among first time Filipino mothers, b) the mothers' realities with regards to their social and cultural context, c) how such context, together with perceptions of risk and benefits, influence decision-making processes of whether or not to breast feed. This study involved 40 first time mothers aged between 17 years and 43 years living in Barangay Payatas, an urban informal settlement located in Quezon City, the second biggest city in Metro Manila region.

Key Findings: The first time mothers identified several influences' that were categorized into three dominant themes namely: (a) the mothers' knowledge and perceptions of benefits of breastfeeding, (b) their perceptions of the problems associated with breastfeeding, and (c) Influential people. Infant feeding choices was influenced by income, mothers knowledge and marketing of BMS. Infant feeding decision was reflected as a dynamic process that begins pre-partum and persists post-partum. The mothers acknowledged that breastfeeding offered sundry benefits including promoting their baby's health and enabling mother-child bonding but concern was expressed by some mothers regarding a potential for over-attachment between mother and baby. The mother's breastfeeding knowledge, breastfeeding intentions and confidence in infant care were critical in the mother's decision to initiate breastfeeding. Likewise the mother's personal experience mainly perceived insufficiency of breast milk, need to return to work/school and baby's refusal to breastfeed were identified as barriers to maintaining breastfeeding.

Conclusions: The first time mothers' conversations with the researchers illuminate a well-known fact that there exist numerous influences on mothers' infant feeding decisions and choices. The series of opinions and influences that first time mothers have acknowledged as affecting their infant feeding choices, clarified and illustrated in the mothers' own words, are helpful to health care professionals as they advise mothers about appropriate infant and young child feeding practices.