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Knowledge on exclusive breastfeeding and perceived barriers among mothers of babies (6 months – 2 years) in paediatric wards at Teaching Hospital, Jaffna

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Background and objective: According to WHO, exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first 6 months of a baby's life, and this is also followed in Sri Lanka. However, several factors influence EBF, including sociodemographic characteristics, knowledge, and barriers that may interrupt and ultimately affect the baby's health. This study aimed to assess the knowledge and perceived barriers regarding EBF among mothers of children aged six months to two years in the pediatric wards of Teaching hospital Jaffna, and to determine how socio-demographic factors influence exclusive breastfeeding.

Methods: Data was collected through a structured interviewer administered questionnaire (IAQ) in a hospital based descriptive cross-sectional study, conducted among mothers of children aged 6 months to 2 years in the pediatric wards of Teaching Hospital Jaffna. Knowledge and perceived barriers along with socio-demographic influences, were assessed using the IAQ. A systematic sampling method of probability sampling was used. Data were corrected according to guidelines; equal scores were given for correct answers and no scores were assigned for incorrect ones. Knowledge levels were categorized as poor (0-40), average (41-69), or good (≥ 70). The Chi-square test of independence and Fisher's exact test were applied to assess the associations between socio-demographic factors and knowledge levels.

Results: Out of 233 respondents, 96.1% correctly identified the recommended six-month duration for exclusive breastfeeding, but only 77.7% had exclusively breastfed. Overall, 44.2% of mothers had good knowledge, 52.8% had average knowledge, and 3% had poor knowledge on exclusive breastfeeding. Nearly half (49.8%) reported lack of information and experience as barriers, while 37.3% cited inadequate breast milk production, 41.6% inadequate breastfeeding places in public, and 34.3% embarrassment to breastfeed in public. Additionally, 21.9% faced difficulties obtaining help from healthcare workers. Marital status and number of children significantly predicted knowledge levels.

Conclusion: Although mothers demonstrated appreciable knowledge regarding exclusive breastfeeding, several practical barriers prevented adherence. Therefore, increased awareness and motivation by healthcare providers are essential. Promotion of recommended exclusive breastfeeding practices through traditional methods and social media, along with demonstrations of expressed breast milk feeding before hospital discharge is strongly recommended.

Keywords: exclusive breastfeeding, Teaching Hospital, Jaffna, knowledge, perceived barriers