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Factors influencing mothers of premature infants' decision making around infant feeding in a neonatal unit

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rate of preterm births increases every year. Preterm births make a remarkable contribution to the global neonatal mortality rate. Breast milk feeding is one of the economical interventions proven to significantly reduce the rate of neonatal morbidity and mortality, as well as the burden of preterm births. However, preterm infants are less likely to receive breast milk feeds than the infants born at term. Various factors such as socio demographic factors like a woman's age, parity, employment status, level of education, the physical environment, the media and society, among others, largely influence mothers to preterm infants' decision towards infant feeding.

Aim: The aim of the study was to describe factors that influence mother's decision regarding her infant feeding when her baby is admitted into a neonatal unit.

Methodology: A descriptive qualitative approach was used. A purposive sample of 18 (n=18) mothers to preterm infants admitted into the three selected neonatal units was selected. Data collection took place in a tertiary hospital in Gauteng. Semi- structured interviews with the mothers to preterm infants admitted in the neonatal units were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: The decision around preterm infants feeding is a complex endeavour. A woman's self-efficacy is vital in decision making. It is influenced by several factors such as a woman's past experiences, the health benefits of breastmilk feeding for both her and her preterm infant, social influences and the media. In this study, the three main themes that emerged were: 'breast is best- the benefits', 'barriers to breast milk feeding' and 'the role of an institution towards decision making'.

Recommendations: Considering the crucial role breastmilk feeding plays in preventing and reducing prematurity related morbidity and mortality, advocacy for breastfeeding is important. It is pivotal to pay special attention and targeted attention to factors that influence decision making surrounding preterm infant feeding.

Keywords: infant feeding, preterm infants, decision-making, neonatal unit.