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THE INFLUENCE OF INFANT FEEDING PRACTICES ON INFANT MORTALITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Context: Despite the many initiatives implemented over the past decades as part of the global priority on child survival, there still exists high infant mortality in Southern Africa. Although studies have examined factors contributing to poor child health outcomes including the effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, there is paucity of studies on the possible effect of infant feeding practices on infant mortality in the region. This study examines the association between infant feeding practices and infant mortality in Southern Africa. The need to reduce infant mortality is a global health concern hence the United Nations through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) declared the reduction of infant and child mortality as one of its major targets by the year 2015.

Methods: A merged dataset from the most recent Demographic and Health Surveys for Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe was analysed in this study. A total number of 13, 218 infants born in the last five years preceding the surveys whose information on infant feeding practices was available formed the analysis sample. The outcome variable was infant mortality and infant feeding practices which had the categories, no breastfeeding, partial breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding was the main explanatory variable of the study. Other explanatory variables used in the study pertained to maternal demographic and socio-economic characteristics as well as the infants' bio-demographic characteristics. The Cox Hazard Regression Model was employed to examine both the unadjusted and adjusted effect of infant feeding practices on infant mortality in Southern Africa.

Results: Although, exclusive breastfeeding was quite low (12%), its mortality reduction effect was significant, and infants who were exclusively breastfed exhibited a 97% lower risk of dying during infancy compared to no breastfeeding in the region. Further, variations exist by country in the levels and patterns of both infant mortality and infant feeding practices. Country, highest educational level, marital status, sex of child, preceding birth interval and birth weight were the significant predictors of infant mortality in Southern Africa.

Conclusions: Overall, the study found that any form of breastfeeding whether exclusive or partial breastfeeding greatly reduces the risk of infant mortality, with the mortality reduction effect being higher among exclusively breastfed infants in the Southern African region. Thus, in order to reduce the upsurge of infant mortality, there is need to step up the effectiveness of child nutrition programmes that promote breastfeeding and put emphasis on exclusive breastfeeding of infants in the region.

Keywords: Infant feeding practices, infant mortality, Southern Africa.