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ORIGINAL PAPER

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The Attitudes of Breastfeeding Mothers and Healthcare Professionals About Breastfeeding

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ABSTRACT

Background: The attitudes of breastfeeding mothers and healthcare professionals greatly influence decisions about initiation of breastfeeding, duration of breastfeeding, and repeated breastfeeding in multiparous women. **Objective and Methods:** This research aimed to examine, through a questionnaire, the attitudes of breastfeeding mothers and healthcare professionals about breastfeeding in the area covered by the district nurses of the Zagreb-West Health Center. 76 mothers and 74 healthcare professionals participated in the study, which was conducted during 2021. **Results:** All healthcare professionals (100%) believe that breastfeeding in the first 6 months is important, and 97% of them believe that they are adequately educated about proper breastfeeding techniques. Furthermore, 98% of them believe that they provide mothers with all the necessary help and support regarding breastfeeding. 93% of healthcare professionals support breastfeeding in public. Most breastfeeding mothers were over 30 years old and had a higher level of education. Only 47% of women in the maternity unit had skin-to-skin contact, while 73% stayed in the room with their baby. In 89% of women, the first breastfeeding occurred within the first hour after birth. The greatest assistance during breastfeeding was provided to mothers by healthcare personnel (94%). **Conclusion:** Continuous education of healthcare professionals and raising public awareness about the importance of breastfeeding must be a priority for every society.

Keywords: breastfeeding mothers, breastfeeding, attitudes, healthcare professionals.

1. BACKGROUND

The multiple effects of breast milk on the health, growth and development of infants have been proven by numerous studies over a long period of time (1). The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have organized projects and campaigns aimed at promoting exclusive breastfeeding (2). The nutritional value of breast milk is specific. The ratio and composition of valuable substances such as protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, fats and water are adjusted to the infant's daily requirements and fully meet them during the first six months of life. The first milk is called colostrum, and it is produced by the mammary cells of pregnant women. Mature breast milk is produced seven to ten days after birth. Each time the baby is breastfed, the level of prolactin in the mother's blood increases, which plays an important role in milk secretion. Nutrition is an important factor in child development, and breast milk meets the criteria of ideal food for children from newborn age. We distinguish five values of breast milk, which are: nutritional, protective, psychosocial, practical and economic (3, 4). As mentioned, breast milk also has a defensive role, more precisely, it contains antibodies that help the child's body fight against diseases caused by viruses and bacteria, and thus breastfeeding reduces the risk of asthma and allergies. In addition to having numerous positive effects on the child's growth and development, breastfeeding also affects the mother's faster recovery after pregnancy and her overall psycho-physical health (5-8).

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2. OBJECTIVE

This research aimed to examine, through a questionnaire, the attitudes of breastfeeding mothers and healthcare professionals about breastfeeding in the area covered by the district nurses of the Zagreb-West Health Center.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This prospective study was conducted during 2021 in the area covered by the outpatient service of the Zagreb-West Health Center. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed for the purpose of research. 76 breastfeeding mothers and 74 health workers were included in the research. Each subject completed an informed consent form, and the research itself was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Health Center. Two different questionnaires were used, one for breastfeeding mothers (22 questions) and the other for healthcare professionals (11 questions). Microsoft Excel (version 365 Microsoft, Washington, United States of America) and statistical program SPSS (version 22, IBM, New York, United States of America) were used for statistical processing.

4. RESULTS

Data were processed for a total of 150 respondents, of whom 76 were breastfeeding mothers and 74 were healthcare workers.

All healthcare professionals believe that breastfeeding a child is extremely important in the first 6 months (Figure 1).

Healthcare professionals are of the opinion that they provide breastfeeding mothers with all the necessary support and assistance regarding breastfeeding in 98% of cases. Also, 96% of healthcare professionals are satisfied with the way mothers apply breastfeeding techniques.

When health professionals were asked what their position was on breastfeeding in public, 93% of them said they fully supported it, while 7% partially supported it.

83% of respondents believe that the role of healthcare professionals in promoting breastfeeding is sufficient, 13% believe that the role is partial, and only 2%

AGE (years)	BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS (%)	HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS (%)
<25	9	2
26-30	26	7
31-40	47	21
41-50	15	34
>50	3	36

Table 1. Age distribution

LEVEL OF EDUCATION	BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS	HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS
Primary school	3	0
Secondary school	28	5
College	31	47
University	38	48

Table 2. Distribution by education level

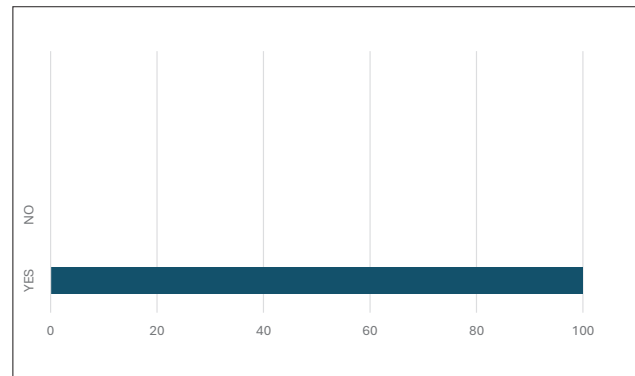


Figure 1. Attitude about breastfeeding a child in the first 6 months (%)

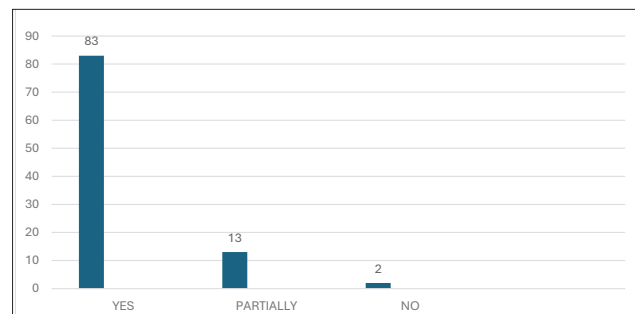


Figure 2. Attitudes about the sufficiency health workers in promoting breastfeeding (%)

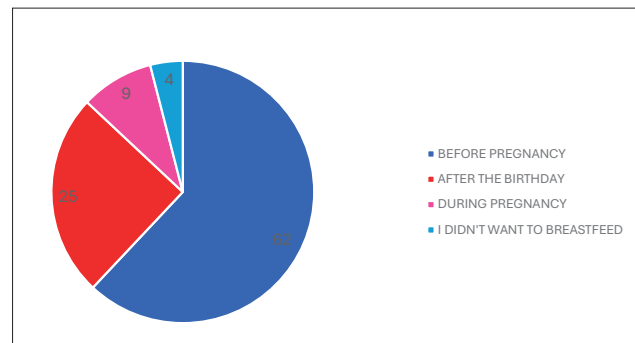


Figure 3. Time to make a decision about breastfeeding (%)

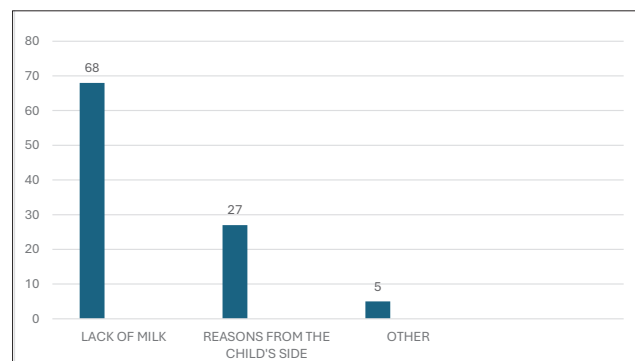


Figure 4. Reasons for stopping breastfeeding (%)

believe that the role is insufficient (Figure 2).

The majority of breastfeeding mothers had two births (59%), followed by one birth (28%), while the fewest had three or more births (13%). Among them, the majority gave birth vaginally (63%), while 37% gave birth by cesarean section. Most children were born at term, i.e. after the 37th week of pregnancy (78%). In as many as 89% of women, the first breastfeeding occurred within the first hour after birth. As for the accommodation of mothers and babies, 73%

SATISFACTION	MATERNITY NURSES (%)	DISTRICT NURSES (%)
I am completely satisfied	74	83
I am not satisfied	7	6
I am partially satisfied	19	11

Table 3. Satisfaction with breastfeeding assistance provided by maternity nurses vs. district nurses

of them were accommodated in rooms together with their babies (so-called rooming in).

Most women made the decision to breastfeed before pregnancy (62%) (Figure 3).

When asked who taught breastfeeding mothers the most about breastfeeding techniques, 92% of respondents said that most of the help during breastfeeding was provided by healthcare professionals. Similarly, 94% of respondents said that healthcare professionals provided the most help during breastfeeding.

Mothers who have more children breastfed their last born child even after the child reached the age of one (56%).

Women cited a lack of milk as the main reason for stopping breastfeeding in 68% of cases (Figure 4).

5. DISCUSSION

The study included 76 mothers, most of whom were between 26 and 35 years of age, which is consistent with recent trends in later childbearing. One reason for this is the continued education of young women, which is also evident from our results (69% of them completed high school and university). In the study conducted by Čatipović et al., the average age of mothers was 37.8 years (9).

According to numerous studies, there are no differences in mothers' attitudes and satisfaction with breastfeeding based on their employment status (10, 11). Our research also showed similar attitudes, with 48% of employed and 52% of unemployed mothers participating. However, it has been proven that socioeconomic status and education level are strongly associated with the duration of breastfeeding. Mothers with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status breastfeed their children for much shorter periods and much less frequently. According to Ekubay et al. in a study conducted in Ethiopia, early initiation of breastfeeding was higher among mothers aged 30-34 and mothers with multiple births (12). Boyer stated in her research that older women and women with more years of education breastfeed more than others. However, most women in the UK stop breastfeeding 4 weeks after giving birth (13).

According to UNICEF, one in five children in developed countries has never been breastfed. Also, according to UNICEF data from 2019, only 44% of all newborns in the world are exclusively breastfed for the first five months of life (14). In Croatia, 82.7% of newborns were breastfed until they were discharged from the maternity units. According to our research, the first breastfeeding occurred within the first hour of birth in 89% of mothers. According to the research by Dudukac et al., 50.8% of respondents breastfed

their children within the first hour after birth, and 51.6% of respondents breastfed exclusively in the first 6 months. On the other hand, in Turkey, 71% of babies were breastfed within the first hour after birth, and 86% were breastfed within the first day after birth. However, the same researchers report that 97.3% of breastfeeding mothers gave breast milk as the first food to their babies (15). In a study conducted by Foad Weshahy et al., 92% of physicians agreed that exclusive breastfeeding is the most beneficial form of feeding infants during the first 6 months of life (16). Carberry et al. state that early initiation of breastfeeding, i.e. within the first hour, protects babies from death during the most vulnerable period of life. Also, every hour that passes after birth before breastfeeding is initiated increases the risk of subsequent breastfeeding difficulties (17). In fact, according to UNICEF, new evidence suggests that the risk of death within the first 28 days of life is 41% higher in babies who are breastfed within 2-23 hours of birth, compared to babies who are breastfed within the first hour of birth (18).

WHO and UNICEF have jointly launched a program that promotes breastfeeding in maternity hospitals – “Baby-Friendly Maternity Units” which is implemented through the “Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding”. One of the steps is for mothers and children to stay in the same room, and according to our research, 73% of them were placed in the so called rooming-in. According to Čatipović et al., 83.7% of healthcare professionals believe that rooming-in is important for establishing breastfeeding (9). An equally important step is educating pregnant women about the benefits and methods of breastfeeding, and according to the results of our research, as many as 92% of healthcare professionals participated in teaching mothers about the correct breastfeeding technique. In the study by Čatipović et al., 42.8% of healthcare professionals responded that they never participate in breastfeeding education, and only 10.4% of them did so regularly. Also, 58.1% of healthcare professionals stated that they often and regularly advise mothers to exclusively breastfeed in the first 6 months of their child's life (9).

In our study, when problems with breastfeeding arose, mothers in 76% of cases turned to health professionals for help (42% to district nurses and 34% to doctors). When we examine who provided them with the best quality help during breastfeeding, 94% of the respondents said it was health professionals, and only 6% non-health personnel. Foad Weshahy et al. in their research state that 85% of healthcare professionals have excellent knowledge about breastfeeding. Furthermore, they state that 59% of doctors and 72% of nurses have helped mothers with proper positioning during breastfeeding. The same authors state that personal experience is the greatest source of knowledge among healthcare professionals about breastfeeding management (16). An important role in forming mothers' attitudes about breastfeeding is played by their partners (96%) and family and friends (98%), which is also in line with recent research (19). Dudukcu et al.

state in their research that in most cases, breastfeeding mothers were the main decision makers on how to feed their child (15).

In our study, 93% of healthcare professionals stated that they fully support breastfeeding in public. According to data from the study by Čatipović et al., only 62% of healthcare professionals fully supported breastfeeding in public (9). Boyer states in his research that in the UK, 45% of mothers feel uncomfortable breastfeeding in front of other people, and more than 40% of those who breastfeed for up to 8 months have never done so in public (13). A 2016 study shows that 86.8% of respondents from the general population support breastfeeding in public (20).

Research on the attitudes of healthcare professionals towards breastfeeding has shown that older healthcare professionals and those with a higher level of education have more favorable attitudes towards breastfeeding. Our research involved 70% of healthcare workers over the age of 41, and 95% of them had a college or university degree, and 100% of them believed that breastfeeding a child is extremely important in the first 6 months of life. Foad Weshahy et al. state in their research that > 60% of medical staff have a positive attitude towards breastfeeding (16).

Mothers, and especially healthcare professionals, have reported numerous positive effects of breastfeeding on children, which is consistent with the literature reviewed (21-23). Healthcare professionals were also able to mention the positive effects of breastfeeding on the recovery and health of mothers, which is in line with their level of education and experience. As many as 96% of healthcare professionals were satisfied with the way breastfeeding mothers apply the breastfeeding techniques they had learned.

6. CONCLUSION

Every baby should start life breastfeeding within half an hour of birth. It is also important to ensure that mothers and babies are in the same room 24 hours a day for many reasons. Health professionals and the public should unconditionally support breastfeeding in public. Attitudes, knowledge and practice of health professionals can positively or negatively influence the breastfeeding experience of mothers. In order to improve the rates of exclusive and complete breastfeeding, it is necessary to provide quality education. In a society that has expert and educated medical staff, as well as a public sensitized to the importance of breastfeeding, higher rates of breastfeeding are to be expected, and not only in the first 6 months of a child's life.

- **Patient Consent Form:** All participants were informed about subject of the study.
- **Author's Contribution:** S.P., D.R. and L.R. gave substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work in acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work. T.K.Ž., R.F. and K.Ž. had a part in the article preparing for drafting or revising it critically for important intellectual

content. S.P., Z.H. and A.D. gave final approval of the version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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