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Empirical study on Infant Feeding Practices and Information Search Behavior of Mothers (With Special Reference to Infant Feeding Market in Sri Lanka - 2001 - 2002

By

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ABSTRACT

Nothing is more important for a mother than assuring the best in life for her baby. Nutrition is perhaps the most vital aspect of this. Most mothers choose to breast feed their infants, as breast milk is the best and the most natural food for babies. However for infants who are classified as below twelve months of age, Infant formula, better known as scientifically modified cow's milk, is the only product recognized by the health authorities, when mothers cannot breast feed or need a supplement, due to many reasons.

Breast feeding campaigns all over the world are propagated by local health authorities and support groups such as World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Breast feeding campaigns to, popularize breast feeding in many countries within various social groups has been extensively researched. However, research material on Infant milk foods usage during infancy as well as mothers attitudes towards infant feeding, is limited. WHO has imposed a universal code of conduct with guidelines for the promotion of breast milk substitutes to protect breast feeding practices from commercial influence and exploitation. In the WHO code, it is clearly stated that the employees of Infant food manufacturing companies should not have any direct contact with mothers and if needed through health workers such as doctors, paramedics and midwives (condition). This is especially for developing countries.

It is necessary and sufficient that the medical profession recommends breast milk is the best (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Nutrition & International Code of Marketing WHO Geneva 1981) and the only best in the world. Alternatively in the

absence of above conditions it is reluctantly recommended to go for alternative supplementary milk foods, such as infant formula.

A significant proportion of mothers in developing countries (International WHO Code Action Report September 2001) practice various types of infant feeding practices such as Breast feeding, infant formula feeding and full cream milk powder feeding, for their infants below twelve months.

The whole cow's milk or full cream milk powder, a practice according to scientific opinion, is not nutritionally suitable for infants below twelve months. (American academy of paediatrics in 1992, United kingdom-Department of health 1995)

This thesis is intended to carry out a critical evaluation on "Infant feeding practices" and the "Information search behavior of mothers" during the first year of life of an infant. Weaning foods (kanji, fruit juices ,cereals) or any other semi solid foods that are given for infants below twelve months as part of the mix feeding (Breast milk ,Formula feeding, weaning foods) are not considered in the study, and only the liquid portion of the diet is considered.

The objective of the research is to study the different infant feeding practices and the information search behavior of mothers.

The internal knowledge of the mothers, and what alternative sources of information mothers employ to gain awareness and knowledge and finally to identify the key factors that influence mother's beliefs and attitudes on infant feeding practices was studied.

Based on the outcome of the answers the hypotheses, the association between the "Demographic variables" and the "Infant feeding practices", the mothers "degree of the knowledge on Nutrition" and the "External sources" that mothers look forward to gather knowledge, the association between the knowledge gained from mass media and the association between the attitudes and belief changes of mothers on Infant feeding practices due to media advertising was tested.

The research was carried out on 200 mothers with infants below twelve months old with the assistance of four medical delegates at Nestle Lanka limited inclusive of the researcher and the doctors who were attached to these institutions, using the questionnaire. The information for the questionnaire was gathered through face to face interviews.

It was observed that mother's awareness on breast feeding was significantly higher during the infancy, specially the first six months of an infant's life.

In the absence of breast milk, mothers decide on alternatives such as Infant formula or Full cream milk powder, particularly during the second six months.

Research findings shows that most mothers decide for themselves and it was based on their "Degree of knowledge on Nutrition" (Internal knowledge on feeding practices – beliefs, attitude, and past experiences what was stored in the memory).

There was no significance between the demographic variables and the Infant feeding practices in the study.

Influences from the “External sources” was not significant, such as Health workers (Doctors, Paramedics), Parents, Husbands, Friends and Media.

As a result of mass media communication the mothers have not gained a significant knowledge on Infant feeding practices.

Due to the exposure to the “mass media” communication / advertisement the mothers have not change their “Beliefs and attitudes” on the importance of nutritional values, on “Infant feeding practices”

According to hypothesis it was proved that the majority of the mothers depend on their nutritional knowledge.

There are sufficient materials on breast feeding available for health workers and mothers but few on infant formula.

Therefore the study could be of strategic important on Infant feeding practices in Sri Lanka.

Finally, it should be stated that the health workers who are involved in propagating, formulating, and implementing proper infant feeding practices during the first year of life, specially in second six months to maximize their effort to bring up the nutritional status of our young children.

Today’s infants will be tomorrow’s adults in the society and their contribution is of paramount important to build a nutritionally healthy society.

Table of Content

	Page
Acknowledgement	I
Abstract	ii-v
Table of Content	vi
Abbreviations	vii
List of Tables	viii-ix
List of Figures	ix
Chapter One: Introduction	1 - 03
Background	03 – 11
Research Problem	11
Objectives of the study	12
Hypothesis	13
Methodology	14 - 17
Significance of the study	17 – 19
Limitation of the study	19
Chapter Two: Literature Survey	20 – 55
Summary	55
Chapter Three	56 –77
Chapter Four	78 – 82
Chapter Five .: Conclusion and Recommendation	83 –85
Appendices	86 – 116
Appendix No: 1	
Appendix No: 2	
Appendix No: 3	
References	117