

Maternal experiences during the establishment of feeding among infants who have feeding issues at selected neonatal and paediatric units in the Gampaha district

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Background: Infants in neonatal care, infants born prematurely, low birth weight, and hypoxia are at risk of feeding and early communication difficulties. In paediatric care, there are also specific children who have feeding difficulties because eating is a complicated learned behaviour, which happens during infancy. When the infant is in the neonatal unit, there is a lack of interaction between the infant and the mother, and therefore, family-centred care is encouraged by health professionals and so maternal experiences about feeding care are important to speech and language therapists (SLTs) as they specialize in feeding and swallowing evaluation and intervention.

Objectives: The main objective of this study was to identify maternal experiences during the establishment of feeding among infants who have feeding issues at selected neonatal and paediatric units in the Gampaha district. The specific objectives were to discover maternal experiences of professional support, feeding methods and techniques and family support during the establishment of feeding among infants who have feeding issues.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out with a sample size of fifty participants. The study setting was neonatal and paediatric units of selected government hospitals with mothers of infants with feeding difficulties. The data was analysed using SPSS 23.0 statistical software.

Results: Results suggested that the majority of the participants had good support from the professionals including doctors, nursing staff and speech and language therapists. Most of the participants had a fair experience about the feeding method and techniques. Considering the family support, most of the participants had fair, good or excellent support. The results found that there is poor experience and knowledge about the feeding method and techniques before coming into the NICU or PICU. Apart from this, the majority of the participants had fair experiences during hospitalization.

Conclusion: The purpose of this study was to identify the maternal experiences during the establishment of feeding among infants who have feeding issues. Maternal experience is important to establish connectivity with infants who have difficulties because the mother is the main person who interacts and feeds the infants in the NICU or PICU and at home. According to results, some of the participants had poor knowledge and experiences about feeding methods and techniques. Therefore, it is essential to offer more awareness to the mothers about knowledge and training of the feeding methods and techniques and provide the best support as health care professionals.

Key words: *Maternal experiences, Feeding difficulties, Neonatal intensive care unit, Paediatric intensive care unit.*