

Parents' self- reported experience of feeding-related care of their premature infants while admitted to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in Sri Lanka: A qualitative study.

Bandara, P.M.N.M.^{1*}, Hettiarachchi, S.^{1,2}

¹*Department of Disability Studies, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka*

²*Ayati National Centre for Children with Disabilities, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka*

* nadeeshabandara008@gmail.com

Background: Preterm infants experience various medical, neurological and developmental complications that may affect feeding skills. They are admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for special care and monitoring. Anecdotally, during the hospitalization in the local NICU, mothers' and fathers' involvement and confidence in the feeding-related care of their premature infants is low and there is a lack of interaction between the infant.

Objective/s: The main objective of this study was to explore both mothers' and fathers' experience of feeding-related care of their premature infants while admitted to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in Sri Lanka.

Methods: A qualitative study using a phenomenological approach was carried out with a sample of ten couples of participants including ten mothers and ten fathers who have premature infants (born between 28 -37 weeks gestational age) with feeding difficulties who have been hospitalized at a neonatal intensive care unit. A semi structured interview was conducted via telephone using an interview guide with 15 open ended questions. A simple thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results: The findings were analyzed and main three themes and subthemes emerged. The main themes were Parental role, Parent- infant closeness and separation in NICUs and Speech and Language Therapy services support for feeding related care in a local NICU. The results illuminated that the majority of mothers had a minimal role in the NICU and all the fathers reported that they have been excluded from infant care in the NICU.

Conclusion/s: Overall there is a lack of satisfaction on the minimal involvement in infant feeding care in the NICU which was a major parent. There is a difference between mothers' and fathers' perceived experience and knowledge they have received during hospitalization of their infant in the local NICU. In Sri Lanka (a Global South country) fathers are the 'forgotten' parent in terms of early feeding interventions. Parents show a satisfaction about the support of the NICU staff and SLT. Speech and language therapists need to take a lead in offering more information and training to parent and involve them more directly in feeding related infant care. The findings of the study will be helpful to make recommendations regarding feeding when working with parents and infants in the SLT clinical settings.

Key words: *Prematurity, Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), parental role, parent – infant bonding, feeding care, Speech and Language Therapists, alternative feeding methods, feeding difficulties*