

Supporting All Families in Feeding their Baby

Ensuring that parents are able to make informed choices about infant nutrition



Declan O'Brien, Director General,
British Specialist Nutrition Association



Recent research has revealed that parents are unlikely to be able to make an informed choice about what to feed their newborn baby. This is due partially to gaps in health professionals' knowledge about feeding methods but also due to a mistaken belief that the Baby Friendly Initiative only permits them to communicate about breastfeeding. More comprehensive education in this area is urgently required.

A recent survey of midwives and health visitors conducted by Synergy Healthcare Research for the British Specialist Nutrition Association (BSNA) set out to understand the current infant feeding service for infants aged 0-12 months in the UK. The first stage, conducted in London, Birmingham and Manchester in February 2014, involved two focus groups with midwives, two groups with health visitors and eleven in-depth interviews with GPs, paediatric dietitians, paediatricians and neonatologists. This was followed by an online survey of 100 midwives and 100 health visitors conducted during May 2014. Although the findings of the research have not yet been published, they were presented at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) Annual Conference on 28th April 2015.

The BSNA supports breastfeeding and increasing rates of breastfeeding. However, for those parents who cannot, or choose not to, breastfeed, bottle feeding with infant formula is the only safe alternative for babies. The survey found that many parents are only receiving advice on how to breastfeed, and are frequently uninformed about formula feeding. When asked what prompts them to give out information on formula feeding antenatally, a significant

proportion of midwives and health visitors claimed that parents had to specifically request it; this is partially due to gaps in their own knowledge about formula feeding but also due to a mistaken belief that the Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) only permits them to communicate about breastfeeding. It is therefore unlikely that parents are able to make an informed choice about what to feed their newborn baby, even though this is what the BFI actually recommends.

Midwives and health visitors need more support

We urgently need to provide midwives and health visitors with more support. The research found that 85% of midwives and 55% of health visitors were unable to spend as much time discussing feeding with new parents as they would like, owing to lack of time and resources.

Synergy's research reiterates and supports many of the findings in Pressure Points, a survey published by the Royal College of Midwives, which found that mothers who choose to bottle feed are finding it difficult to obtain the information and support they need. The RCM survey also found that, in some cases, this is due to time and resource constraints.

Yet the lack of, or late, provision of information around formula feeding could lead to potentially unsafe practices; for example, Synergy's research found that 17% of midwives and 18% of health visitors typically do not give advice on the safe preparation of formula feed at all. This represents both a risk and a burden to the NHS and may lead to increased healthcare costs.

The research also found that a significant proportion of midwives and health visitors want to know more about bottle feeding, but because formal education is limited, some are obtaining their information on formula milks from supermarket shelves or simply relying on advice from friends. This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation for health professionals and parents alike. Bottle feeding is extremely common in the UK: only 24% of mothers in England (22% in Scotland, 17% Wales, 13% Northern Ireland) exclusively breastfeed their babies at six weeks, dropping to a mere 1% by six months, opting to switch to formula milk instead. Consequently, it is estimated that each year approximately 531,000 British mothers might not be receiving enough information on their baby's nutrition.

It is unlikely that parents are receiving enough information to allow them to make an informed choice about their baby's nutrition

Synergy's research found that informed parental choice is limited: 70% of midwives and 65% of health visitors said that prospective parents must specifically ask for information about formula feeding before they will provide any information about it. Some of the midwives and health visitors surveyed perceived that parents could be made to feel guilty if they bottle fed, and there may be a potential conflict between encouraging breastfeeding and ensuring the emotional health of the parent. For this reason, some 45% of midwives and 33% of health visitors said they felt there is disproportionately too much focus on breastfeeding as opposed to formula feeding in the advice provided to new mothers in their service. One midwife in London commented: "I definitely think we're not able to provide that good care for women. If they're bottle feeding, it's like – that's not our remit, sorry, I don't know anything." See Figure 1.

In their survey, the Royal College of Midwives found that 76% of women who had chosen to bottle feed said they were not given enough active support and encouragement in feeding their baby. It was noted that: "whilst there is some improvement in supporting breastfeeding, there is an urgent need to improve the situation for mothers who opt to bottle feed."

Midwives and health visitors recognise their own knowledge gaps on formula feeding

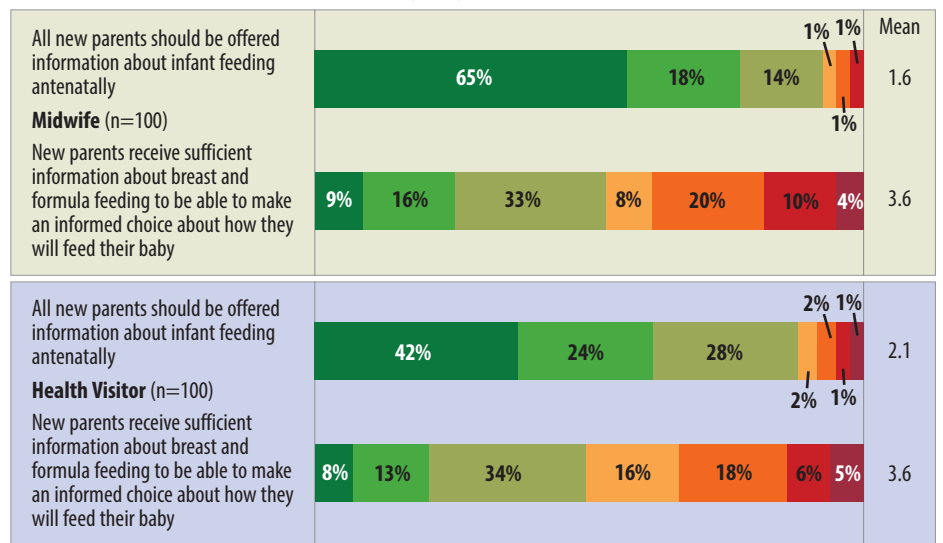
Synergy's research exposed a worrying lack of confidence amongst midwives and health visitors in their own ability to advise parents on formula feeding.

There is widespread acknowledgment of knowledge gaps around formula feeding. The majority of midwives (62%) and health visitors (71%) surveyed said they would like to know more about the latest research on formula milks, whilst 42% of midwives and 56% of health visitors said they would like to know more about formula feeding.

It is evident that more training is needed on bottle feeding and formula milks. Ninety per cent of midwives reported that they had a very high level of knowledge about breastfeeding but only 60% expressed the same level of knowledge with regard to formula feeding. Among health visitors, 68% said they had a very high level of knowledge about breastfeeding as opposed to 41% for formula feeding.

The Royal College of Midwives found⁴ that almost a quarter of third year student midwives reported a lack of practical experience to support women with bottle feeding and 33% reported not having sufficient practical experience to support women who mix-fed (both breast and bottle). One third year student midwife commented: "I have only had one academic session on bottle feeding and the details of formula feeding are not generally extensively discussed because of the Baby Friendly Initiative."⁴

Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements around infant feeding (aged 0-12 months)?



Mean where very strongly agree = 1, very strongly disagree = 7
 1 Very strongly agree 2 Strongly agree 3 Agree 4 Neither agree nor disagree 5 Disagree 6 Strongly disagree 7 Very strongly disagree

It is vital that education of midwives and health visitors takes proper account of infant formula and bottle feeding techniques in order to give parents all the information they need to feed their baby appropriately. At present, it seems that 73% of mothers who choose to bottle feed may not be receiving enough information about bottle feeding.⁴

With regards to bottle feeding, the Baby Friendly Initiative is widely misinterpreted and misapplied

For many, the Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) sets the standard for infant nutrition in the UK, and a significant proportion of the midwives and health visitors surveyed cited BFI as one of their top three reference points. Although breastfeeding is, and always should be, the preferred option, the BFI also recommends that all parents are enabled to make an informed choice about feeding their baby and are supported in that choice by health professionals.

However, the Synergy research found that the BFI is widely misinterpreted and misapplied. Forty-five per cent of midwives and 24% of health visitors believe that their Trust or hospital does not

allow them to provide parents with information about formula feeding, unless they specifically ask for it, thus denying parents the ability to make a choice about their infant's nutrition.

There is a real need for healthcare authorities, including Clinical Commissioning Groups, to support midwives and health visitors in following and interpreting BFI correctly. We welcome the Royal College of Midwives recommendation that: "support is given to women equally regardless of their infant feeding method."⁴ We further welcome the recent report of the All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, including its recommendation for: "improved national training for midwives and maternity support workers in breast and bottle feeding: clarification of the BFI."

Conclusion

"All women, whether they choose to breastfeed or bottle feed, deserve to receive all the support and advice they need to get it right."⁴

Research has revealed a widespread, critical lack of education and information in regard to infant nutrition. Both health professionals and parents need to be sufficiently well informed to be able to make the best decisions for the infants in their care. More comprehensive education in this area is urgently required.

References: 1. Infant feeding: Supporting Parent Choice, Pressure Points, Royal College of Midwives. The RCM's survey was conducted amongst amongst midwives, student midwives and maternity support workers during May 2014. https://www.rcm.org.uk/sites/default/files/Pressure%20Points%20-%20Infant%20Feeding%20-%20Final_0_0.pdf 2. <http://www.unicef.org.uk/BabyFriendly/About-Baby-Friendly/Breastfeeding-in-the-UK/UK-Breastfeeding-rates/> 3. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/birth-summary-tables-england-and-wales/2013/stb-births-in-england-and-wales-2013.html>. There were 698,512 live births in England and Wales in 2013. 4. Infant feeding: Supporting Parent Choice, Pressure Points, Royal College of Midwives, May 2014. 5. The Early Years, published February 2015 https://gallery.mailchimp.com/b6ac32ebdf72e70921b025526/files/APPG_Report_Early_YearsFINAL.pdf

About Declan O'Brien, Director General, BSNA...
 The BSNA is the trade association representing the manufacturers of products designed to meet the particular nutritional needs of individuals; these include specialist products for infants and young children (including infant formula, follow on formula and complementary weaning foods), medical nutrition products for diagnosed disorders and medical conditions, sports foods and gluten-free foods. Declan was appointed BSNA Director General on 1st March 2015. He was previously Director of the Federation of Irish Chemical Industries, which evolved into the Animal and Plant Health Association, based in Dublin, from 1989-2005 and Managing Director of the International Federation for Animal Health Europe (IFAH-Europe), from 2005-2014. www.bsna.co.uk