

Exploring the Challenges of Adhering to Care Guidelines and Feeding Practices among Mothers of Preterm Infants

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Abstract

Mothers of preterm infants face significant challenges in adhering to care guidelines and managing feeding practices, often hindering the health outcomes of their babies. This study aimed to explore these perceived challenges, focusing on the barriers that mothers encounter. Using a phenomenological qualitative research design, 7 participants were selected through non-probability purposive sampling. Data was collected through socio-demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed five key themes: (1) Understanding and Interpretation of Care Guidelines – mothers faced difficulties with unclear instructions and conflicting medical advice. (2) Barriers to Accessing Healthcare Services – financial burdens, including treatment and transportation costs, and lack of local resources, particularly in rural areas, were significant obstacles. (3) Personal and Family Support Challenges – limited family support and emotional overload due to isolation added stress to caregiving. (4) Cultural and Societal Influences – cultural beliefs and societal pressure influenced mothers' caregiving practices. (5) Feeding Challenges – difficulties with breastfeeding and managing specialized feeding equipment were common. The study concludes that addressing these barriers through improved communication, better access to resources, and enhanced support systems is essential to empower mothers, ensuring better adherence to care guidelines and promoting the health of preterm infants.

Keywords: Perceived Challenges, Adherence, Care Guidelines, Feeding Practices, Preterm Babies.

Introduction

Caring for preterm infants presents unique challenges that hinder mothers' adherence to essential care guidelines. Preterm infants, born before 37 weeks, often face serious health issues, including respiratory problems, feeding difficulties, and developmental delays, making proper care critical for their survival and growth. However, mothers often struggle due to factors like unclear communication with healthcare providers, financial burdens, and emotional stress. Many healthcare providers use complex medical jargon, leaving mothers confused and uncertain, while conflicting advice can make it difficult to follow care instructions. Financial stress due to high medical costs and limited resources, particularly in rural areas, adds to the burden, preventing adherence to guidelines. Emotional challenges such as isolation, anxiety, and lack of support further complicate caregiving. Cultural beliefs may also influence mothers' caregiving practices, potentially clashing with medical recommendations. Moreover, a lack of knowledge about appropriate feeding practices, such as breastfeeding and nutritional needs, is a significant barrier. To overcome these challenges, healthcare providers must improve communication, offer financial assistance, and provide emotional support. By addressing these barriers, healthcare systems can empower mothers, helping them better care for their preterm infants and ultimately improving health outcomes. This study underscores the need for comprehensive support systems to promote adherence to care guidelines, ultimately fostering better health outcomes for preterm infants.

Background of the Study

Globally, about 15 million preterm infants are born annually, accounting for 11% of live births, with complications causing over 1 million neonatal deaths, primarily in low-income countries (WHO, 2024). In India, around 3.5 million preterm births occur yearly, contributing to 16 deaths per 1,000 live births, with many infants suffering from respiratory issues, infections, and neurodevelopmental delays (WHO, 2023). Tamil Nadu sees approximately 15% preterm births annually, with a neonatal mortality rate of 20 per 1,000 live births (NFHS-5, 2020). Limited neonatal care and inadequate feeding practices exacerbate morbidity risks in preterm infants. Addressing these issues through enhanced healthcare systems and maternal education is critical to reducing neonatal mortality and improving health outcomes for preterm infants, especially in underserved areas.

Need for the study

Preterm births are a significant public health concern globally and in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where 15% of all births are preterm. These infants face higher risks of mortality, morbidity, and long-term health complications. Many mothers encounter challenges in adhering to care guidelines and feeding practices due to unclear communication with healthcare providers, financial constraints, emotional stress, and cultural beliefs. Misunderstandings arising from medical jargon and societal pressures further complicate caregiving, leaving mothers feeling inadequate or isolated.

Adequate nutrition during infancy is critical, especially for preterm infants with increased nutritional needs. However, knowledge gaps about feeding practices, such as transitioning from exclusive breastfeeding to complementary feeding, often lead to poor dietary choices. Emotional burdens like anxiety and guilt also hinder mothers' confidence in caregiving.

This study explores these challenges, aiming to inform targeted interventions that improve maternal education, enhance communication, and offer emotional and financial support. By addressing these barriers and fostering culturally sensitive care approaches, healthcare providers can empower mothers,

promote adherence to care guidelines, and improve health outcomes for preterm infants and their families.

Statement of the Problem

“A Study to Explore the Perceived Challenges of Adherence to Care Guidelines and Feeding Practices among Mothers with Preterm Babies in a Selected Hospital”

Objectives

To explore the perceived challenges faced by mothers of preterm babies in adhering to care guidelines and feeding practices in a selected hospital.

Research Tradition

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, aiming to understand the experiences and challenges of mothers in caring for preterm infants.

Assumption

The study assumes that mothers of preterm infants face specific challenges in adhering to care guidelines and feeding practices.

Research Question

What are the perceived challenges faced by mothers in adhering to care guidelines and feeding practices for their preterm infants?

Delimitation

The study focuses on mothers with preterm babies, conducted over four weeks with a limited sample size. It is confined to the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (IOG), Egmore, Chennai.

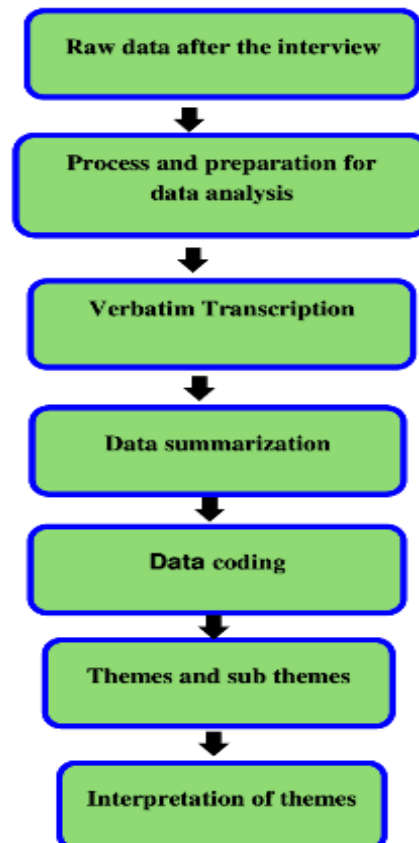
Methods & Materials

This study adopted a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design. It was conducted over four weeks at the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (IOG), Egmore, Chennai, among mothers with preterm babies. The target population included all mothers with preterm babies at IOG, while the accessible population comprised those meeting the inclusion criteria and available during the study. A sample of seven mothers was selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. Inclusion criteria involved mothers with preterm babies who were willing to participate and available during the study period, while sick mothers and those with babies in the NICU were excluded. Demographic variables such as age, gravida, mode of delivery, education, and occupation were examined. Data collection tools included a demographic questionnaire and a one-to-one interview schedule with 10–20-minute audio recordings. Content validity was established by experts in nursing and obstetrics, with modifications incorporated as suggested. Reliability was assessed using the inter-rater reliability method. The data was obtained and analysed by the NVivo qualitative analysis method.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the ethical committee and the Director of IOG. Ethical principles followed included beneficence, respect for dignity, confidentiality, and informed consent, ensuring participant rights and privacy.

FIGURE.1.SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION



Results

The qualitative findings revealed five key themes. **Understanding and Interpretation of Care Guidelines** included **Clarity of Instructions** and **Conflicting Information**, highlighting mothers' struggles with medical jargon and inconsistent advice. **Barriers to Accessing Healthcare Services** featured **Financial Burden** and **Lack of Local Resources**, emphasizing financial strain and limited access. **Personal and Family Support Challenges** involved **Limited Family Support** and **Emotional Overload**, showing isolation and stress. **Cultural and Societal Influences** included **Cultural Beliefs** and **Pressure from the Community**. Lastly, **Feeding Challenges** focused on **Breastfeeding Difficulties** and **Managing Specialized Feeding Equipment**.

Discussion

The findings from this study align with several global research efforts that explore the challenges faced by mothers of preterm infants. Key themes such as barriers to healthcare access, emotional overload, and cultural influences echo across various studies. Igoche David Peter et al. (2024) highlighted the

significant emotional and physical stress experienced by mothers and healthcare providers, emphasizing the need for empathetic communication, which resonates with this study's findings on emotional challenges. Similarly, Madimetja J. Nyaloko et al. (2024) discussed the importance of incorporating cultural practices into neonatal care in South Africa, reflecting the societal pressures mothers face in this study. Additionally, Yaqi Yu et al. (2023) explored the breastfeeding needs of mothers in China, underscoring the need for better breastfeeding knowledge and family support, similar to the feeding challenges identified here. These reviews collectively emphasize the need for healthcare systems to provide clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and emotional support to improve maternal and infant care outcomes.

Implications

Nursing Education

Enhance nursing curricula by incorporating specialized courses focused on preterm infant care to prepare nurses for unique challenges. Training on communication skills is essential to improve interactions with parents. Nurses should also be educated on the emotional and psychological needs of mothers caring for preterm infants, ensuring a holistic approach to care.

Nursing Administration

Promote the development of policies that prioritize comprehensive support systems for mothers of preterm infants. Adequate resources, including educational materials and specialized equipment, must be allocated to meet the needs of families. Foster collaboration among healthcare professionals through multidisciplinary teams to provide well-rounded care.

Nursing Practice

Create individualized care plans for mothers and preterm infants, addressing specific challenges. Use clear and empathetic communication to educate mothers on care guidelines and feeding practices. Regular emotional assessments should be conducted to identify and address the emotional well-being of mothers.

Nursing Research

Identify gaps in research to better understand the challenges faced by mothers of preterm infants. Use qualitative studies to gain deeper insights into their experiences and barriers to adherence. Promote interdisciplinary research and disseminate findings to improve clinical practice and policy.

Recommendations

Conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in mothers' experiences over time. Use mixed methods designs to capture a more comprehensive view of the challenges faced by mothers. Focus on cross-cultural comparative studies to explore the impact of cultural beliefs on care practices.

Limitations

A small sample size limits the generalizability of the study's findings. Self-reported data may lead to biases in responses. The cross-sectional design does not capture the changes in experiences over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the challenges mothers with preterm infants face in adhering to care guidelines and feeding practices, including communication gaps, cultural beliefs, emotional stress, and limited resources. Understanding these barriers allows healthcare professionals to tailor support and improve outcomes for preterm infants. The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive educational programs to enhance communication skills and provide accessible information. Additionally, creating support networks can alleviate emotional burdens. Ongoing research is essential to further explore mothers' experiences and develop effective interventions to improve care for both mothers and preterm infants.

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