Increasing prevalence of breast-feeding

E C COLES, S COTTER, H B VALMAN

British Medical Journal, 1978, 2, 1122

Summary and conclusions

Two studies were performed to gauge the prevalence of and attitudes towards breast-feeding. Mothers delivered in one month in 1975 and in one month in 1977 were sent a questionnaire one month later to determine whether they were breast-feeding their babies; those that were received a second questionnaire at three months. The prevalence of breast-feeding increased significantly between 1975 and 1977, and in both periods primiparas were more likely to breast-feed than multiparas. A survey of mothers' intentions to breast-feed showed that there were no significant racial differences, but that 82% of women in social classes I and II intended to breast-feed compared with 54% in classes IV and V.

These results show that, although the level of breast-feeding was high in 1975, a campaign directed at mothers, doctors, midwives, and health visitors did increase the prevalence of breast-feeding.

Introduction

Despite strong official encouragement of breast-feeding its incidence and duration are disappointingly low in several different parts of the country.^{1,2} These poor results may discourage others who are considering trying to improve the prevalence of breast-feeding in their areas. We describe here a study of the prevalence in a population in which it is both high and increasing.

Methods

All women delivered in this hospital over a one-month period in May and June 1975 and in February 1977 were studied by sending them a postal questionnaire a month after delivery. Mothers who were still breast-feeding at one month were sent a second questionnaire at three months. Those who did not reply were contacted by letter, telephone, or personal visit.

A second study was performed, in which a dietitian (SC) spoke personally to all the mothers delivered within two weeks in 1975 and four weeks in 1977 on the postnatal wards shortly after delivery. The breast-feeding intention, race (from facial appearances), and husband's occupation (for social-class categorisation) were recorded.

Results

All 217 mothers in 1975 and all 252 mothers in 1977 replied to the one-month questionnaire. The only non-responders to the three-month questionnaire were two women who were breast-feeding at one month but then moved abroad.

The proportion of mothers breast-feeding with time is given in the figure. This shows a significant increase in incidence between 1975

Proportion of the population of primiparous or multiparous mothers in surveys who were breast-feeding their infants (totally or partially) up to three months after delivery.

and 1977 ($P < 0.001$) and between multiparas and primiparas ($P < 0.001$). The duration of breast-feeding also increased between the two parts of the study, with 42% of the primiparas and 37% of the multiparas in 1977 still breast-feeding at three months. The reasons given by primiparas for choosing bottle-feeding and those given by all who stopped breast-feeding were similar to those in the study by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.¹

The survey of the intention to breast-feed included 381 mothers and showed the expected social-class gradation in the proportion intending to breast-feed: 82% in classes I and II, 61% in class III, and 54% in classes IV and V. The social-class distribution of our population was unusual in that 40% of mothers were from social classes I and II compared with the national average of 19%.³ When our results were standardised for the social-class distribution of the British Births Survey 1970, the proportion intending to breast-feed was, however, lowered only to 62%. There were no significant differences in intention to breast-feed between races.

Conclusions

Recent pessimism about the low rates of breast-feeding in some populations is not appropriate for all groups. Although the prevalence of breast-feeding was relatively high in our district in 1975, it has since risen in association with a campaign among mothers, doctors, midwives, and health visitors. Our results, therefore, and those of others,^{4,5} show that both the incidence and the duration of breast-feeding may increase with appropriate encouragement, so it is worth while mounting campaigns directed at all relevant staff as well as at mothers.

We acknowledge the help of John Wyeth and Brother Limited with this study.

References

- Martin, J, *Infant feeding 1975: Attitudes and Practice in England and Wales*. London, HMSO, 1978.
- Bacon, C J, and Wylie, J M, *British Medical Journal*, 1976, 1, 308.
- British Births 1970*. London, Heinemann Medical, 1975.
- Jepson, M E, et al, *Lancet*, 1976, 2, 425.
- Sloper, K S, Elsdon, E, and Baum, J D, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 1977, 52, 700.

(Accepted 22 August 1978)

Northwich Park Hospital and the Clinical Research Centre, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 3UJ

E C COLES, MB, MTECH, member of scientific staff of the division of computing and statistics

S COTTER, SRD, dietitian

H B VALMAN, MD, FRCP, consultant paediatrician