

What is already known on this topic

Sociocultural factors are believed to play a part in women's decisions making about infant feeding

No previous study has examined how infant feeding is portrayed in the British media

What this study adds

Breast and bottle feeding are portrayed very differently by the mass media

Bottle feeding is shown more often than breast feeding and is presented as being less problematic

Bottle feeding is associated with "ordinary" families whereas breast feeding is associated with middle class or celebrity women

Health professionals and policy makers should be aware of patterns in media coverage and the cultural background within which women make decisions about infant feeding

entire press sample, we found no explicit references to the health benefits of breast feeding.

Media coverage implies that breast feeding is problematic, funny, and embarrassing, and that it is associated with middle class or celebrity women. In contrast, bottle feeding is socially integrated, highly visible, unproblematic, and associated with "ordinary" families. The health benefits of breast feeding and the risks of formula feeding were largely absent in routine media coverage.

Discussion

The mass media do not promote a positive image of breast feeding, even though it is the method of infant feeding associated with the most health benefits. Media coverage may, of course, reflect the reality of what is publicly visible—that is, that many women do not breast feed in public—and attention to problems may prepare women for the realities of breast feeding. These limited portrayals, however, may also help perpetuate a lack of acceptance of breast feeding in public. They may also sustain ideas that breast feeding is a difficult activity, likely to fail, or that it is an option only for certain types of women. Although some people argue that we live in a culture that makes breast feeding "compulsory," this does not seem to be the case as far as mass media representation is concerned. On the contrary, bottle feeding seems to be normalised and represented as the obvious choice.

We chose to analyse the coverage of infant feeding by the media for one month only, and it may be useful to compare the portrayal of breast and bottle feeding over a longer time frame. This would enable comparison between routine coverage and special initiatives (for example, breastfeeding awareness week). It may also be valuable to extend the sampling to include children's programming to explore messages reaching young people. Examining the decision making processes of media staff could facilitate a greater awareness of obstacles to portraying breast feeding and identify areas for intervention. The study of women's responses to media representations could inform future campaigns and interventions. It is important

that clinicians, health educators, and policymakers are aware of patterns of media coverage and the complex cultural background within which women are making choices about infant feeding. The media may have profound implications for how women decide to feed their babies and thus for the health of the next generation.

Contributors: LH, the principal researcher on the project, formulated the study goals, gathered and analysed the data, and wrote the paper. JK formulated the study goals, analysed the data, and wrote the paper. JG formulated the study goals and provided expertise on infant feeding. Serena Patterson and Yvonne Wayne helped code the television programmes. LH and JK will act as guarantors for the paper.

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Corrections and clarifications

Comparison of intranasal midazolam with intravenous diazepam for treating febrile seizures in children: prospective randomised study

A spelling error occurred in the references at the end of this paper by Eli Lahat and colleagues (8 July, pp 83-6). The name of the first author in reference 11 is Louon (not Lacon).

Global information flow

In the acknowledgment at the end of this editorial by Fiona Godlee and colleagues (30 September, pp 776-7), rather overzealous editing on our part led to an inaccuracy in the description of the Health Information Forum. The forum is an "activity" run as part of the INASP-Health programme and takes the form of a series of open themed meetings organised by INASP-Health.

ABC of breast diseases: Breast cancer—epidemiology, risk factors, and genetics

In this article by K McPherson and colleagues (9 September, pp 624-8) the fourth sentence of the final paragraph on page 627 should have started: "The NSABP study randomised 13 338 [not 3338] women with a risk equal to that of a 60 year old woman..."