

Exploring Infant Feeding Choices in the Northern NSW Aboriginal Community

Catherine Helps, Health Education and Training Institute
catherine.helps@health.nsw.gov.au

Aim: To explore the factors that impact on infant feeding choices in the Northern New South Wales (NSW) Aboriginal Community.

Methods: Yarning style, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight first time Aboriginal mothers, five Aboriginal Health Workers and two community breastfeeding champions. The resulting themes were integrated with an extensive literature review and with a summary of historical events which have impacted infant feeding decisions in this community. Indigenist methodology guided the study design, implementation, thematic analysis and the dissemination of results.

Results: Three key themes were identified from analysis of the interviews. These were “I’m doing the best thing for....” which encompasses the expressed and perceived motivations underpinning infant feeding decisions; “this is what I know...” which explores the sources, quality and gaps in knowledge regarding infant feeding; and “a safe place to feed” identifying the barriers that shame and negative societal messages pose for women as they make infant feeding decisions. An exploration of the impact of historical factors on the Northern NSW Aboriginal community provides a deeper understanding of the cultural context.

Conclusions: Compassionate and holistic maternity care which takes into account the social and cultural lives of Aboriginal women will be the most effective in supporting this group of women as they make their infant feeding choices. Aboriginal people value and trust knowledge passed to them from extended family members and within their community. Programs to increase the knowledge base of Aboriginal women in the whole community may have greater impact on health outcomes than a reliance on expert health professionals.

For the full report on this project visit our website, follow the link to the Rural Research Capacity Building Program and click on ‘view completed projects’

Catherine is a Midwife and Registered Nurse with 20 years experience. For the past ten years Catherine has had the privilege of working with Aboriginal mothers, babies and families as the Community Midwife for the Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Service. She recently became a Midwifery Educator with the HETI Training and Support Unit.

