



GENERAL PRACTITIONER'S ROLE IN BREASTFEEDING PROMOTION AND SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

The promotion and support of breastfeeding has emerged as a national public support in recent years. Many health care professionals have made great efforts to support and improve breastfeeding success by following the guidance and principles of the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physician, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. **The aim** of this study was to determine the role and responsibility of general practitioners in breastfeeding promotion. **Material and methods:** The study is a direct anonymous survey among 82 GPs working in the town of Pleven and the region in 2010. Seventy-six percent (76%) of all interviewed GPs were women and 24% were men. Results: The majority of GPs described themselves as supportive breastfeeding and they are discussing about the advantages of breastfeeding with mothers during pregnancy. Medical problems with breasts like mastitis, sore nipples, hollow nipples and insufficient motivation of mothers most often lead to stop of breastfeeding – 77% and 73%. The percentage of insufficient knowledge of mothers about breastfeeding is high – 45%. The problem of insufficient breast milk is only observed in 4% of the mothers. **Conclusion:** Breastfeeding is the optimal method of infant feeding. It is of great public health importance and it must be encouraged and supported by medical professionals.

Key words: Family physicians, managing breastfeeding, breastfeeding barriers, breastfeeding support

INTRODUCTION

The promotion and support of breastfeeding has emerged as a national public support in recent years. Many health care professionals have made great efforts to support and improve breastfeeding success by following the guidance and principles of the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physician, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (1, 4, 10, 12). UNICEF highlights: "Breast milk is the best food for infants and no other food or liquid is needed during the first six months of life." (9, 12, 13).

Breastfeeding is the optimal source of nutrition (8). The Human milk is specific and it provides

all the essential nutrients necessary for the growth and development of the newborn infant (11). Breastfeeding is not only the most adequate source of nutrition, which also contains unique bioactive substances such as specific and nonspecific antimicrobial factors, cytokines, hormones, growth modulators, etc., which are necessary for normal physical and neuropsychological development of the infant. Breast milk is readily absorbed and protects against numerous infections (otitis media, respiratory infections, urinary tract infections, gastroenteritis), allergies, asthma, obesity, diabetes mellitus (2, 6, 8, 12). Breastfeeding is the physiological norm for both mothers and their children. Breast milk offers medical and psychological benefits not available from human milk substitutes (4, 5)

The aim of this study was to determine the role and responsibility of general practitioners in breastfeeding promotion.

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MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study is a direct anonymous survey among 82 GPs working in the town of Pleven and the region in 2010. Seventy-six percent (76%) of all interviewed GPs were women and 24% were men. The GPs are distributed in several

groups according to their years of practice. The largest was the proportion of physicians with over 15 years of practice – 71%, 11 – 15 years of practice was 18 %, 10% had 5-10 years of practice and only 1% had less than 5 years of practice (**Figure 1**).

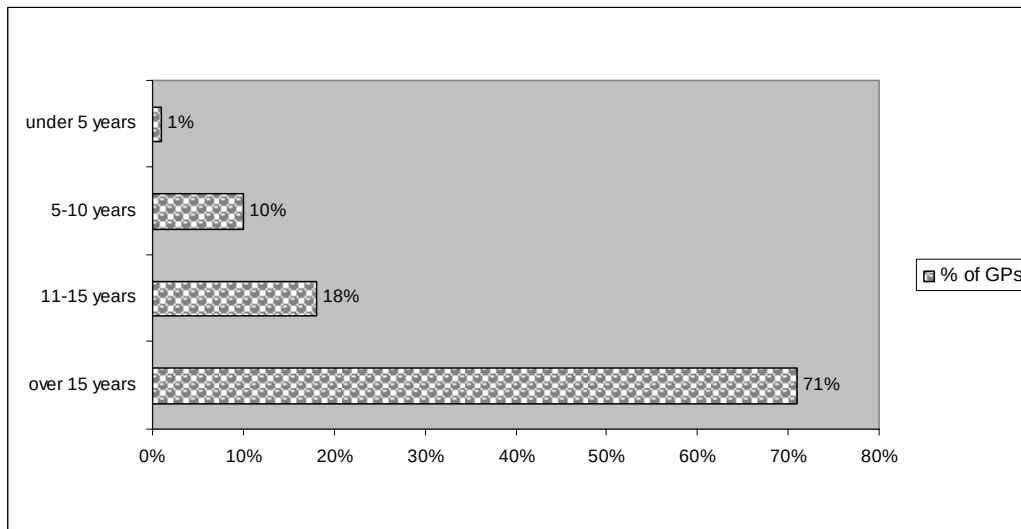


Figure 1. Distribution of GPs according to their years of practice

General practitioners were asked:

- Whether they discuss the advantages of breastfeeding with mothers during pregnancy and what is their attitude to breastfeeding.
- Whether they recommend to mothers to give only breast milk to their infants.
- Until what age do GPs recommend children to be breastfed?
- How breastfeeding could be better promoted in the community?
- What are the reasons which lead to breastfeeding discontinuation?

Study participants were selected randomly. The survey data were processed with Excel software and statistical packages Statgraphics for Windows XP. The findings and conclusions are set at a level of significance 95%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most physicians agree on the importance of breastfeeding and support breastfeeding promotion activities. Many primary care physicians believe their training in breastfeeding management has been adequate, and they have important role in breastfeeding management abilities. The majority of GPs described themselves as supportive

breastfeeding and they are discussing the advantages of breastfeeding with mothers during pregnancy (**Figure 2**).

Forty - seven percent (47%) of all interviewed recommend mothers to give only breast milk to their infants; 21% recommend water without sugar added to be given along with breast milk; 12% recommend water with sugar added to be given along with breast milk and 20 % recommend formula feeding but only when the mothers does not have enough breast milk.

Length of service affects the opinion of doctors – $\chi^2 = 3, 10$; $p = 0, 2125$. Younger physicians with under than 10 years of practice recommended not including anything apart from breast milk in the newborn diet – 78%. Physicians with over 10 years of practice that share the same opinion are 44% ($\chi^2 = 3, 70$; $p = 0, 05$). Interviewed doctors explain that they choose to include a formula feeding if the mother does not have enough milk because it is closest in composition to human milk.

The majority of interviewed GPs – 68% recommend breastfeeding till the age of 1 year; 28% think that infant should be breastfed till 6 months of age; only 4% of GPs think that children should be breastfed more than one year (**Figure 3**). Responses were not influenced by years of practice – $\chi^2 = 0, 24$; $p = 0, 6801$.

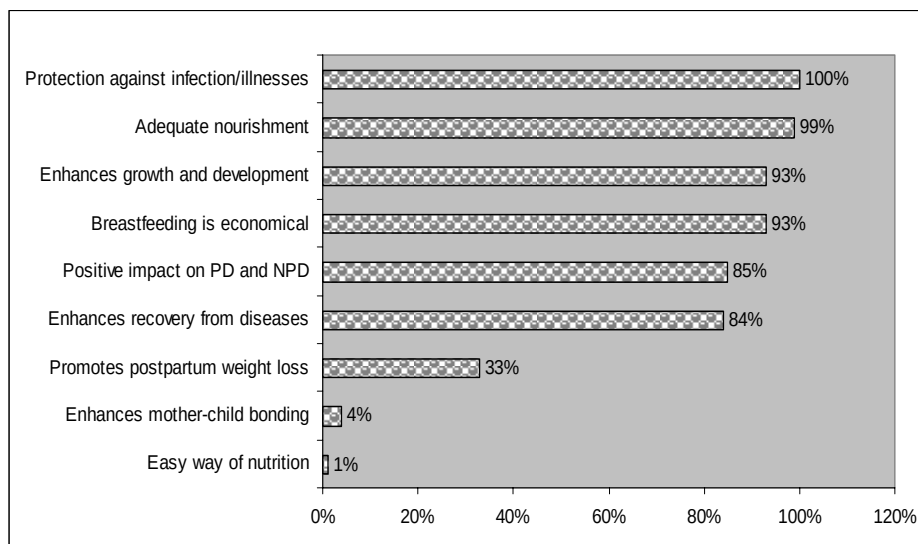


Figure 2. Advantages of breastfeeding according to GPs

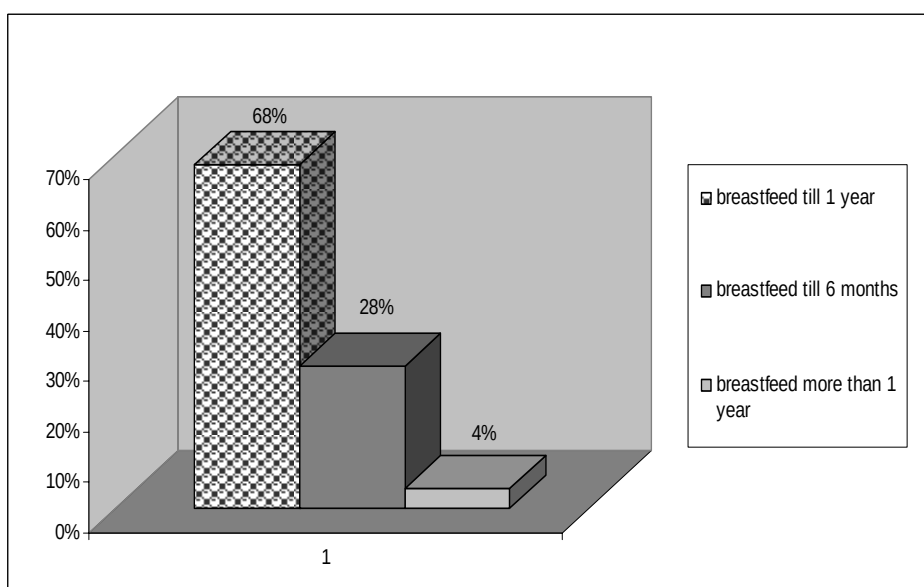


Figure 3. GPs' recommendations regarding frequency of breastfeeding

Forty percent (40%) of GPs advise mothers to exclusively breastfeed on demand till the infant becomes 6 months of age; 1% – to breastfeed the infant 8 times a day; 10% – to breastfeed the infant 7 times a day; 23% – to breastfeed the infant 6 times a day; 12% to breastfeed the infant 5 times a day; 8% – to breastfeed the infant 4 times a day; 4% to breastfeed the infant 3 times a day; 2% – to breastfeed the infant 2 times a day (**Figure 4**).

72% of interviewed GPs advise mothers when there is not enough milk to put the child at the breast frequently, 18% advise the mother to supplement with formula feeding, only 10% recommend both – the mother to put the child

at the breast often and to supplement with formula feeding. 27% of surveyed physicians do not recommend mothers to feed the baby with formula, and 73% responded that they recommend formula feeding when they do so and indicated (GPs gave more than one answer):

- When the mothers does not have enough milk – 82%
- When the mother is sick and she is contraindicated to breastfeed – 23%
- When for some reason the mother stopped breastfeeding – 5%
- When contraindications exist by the child – 5%

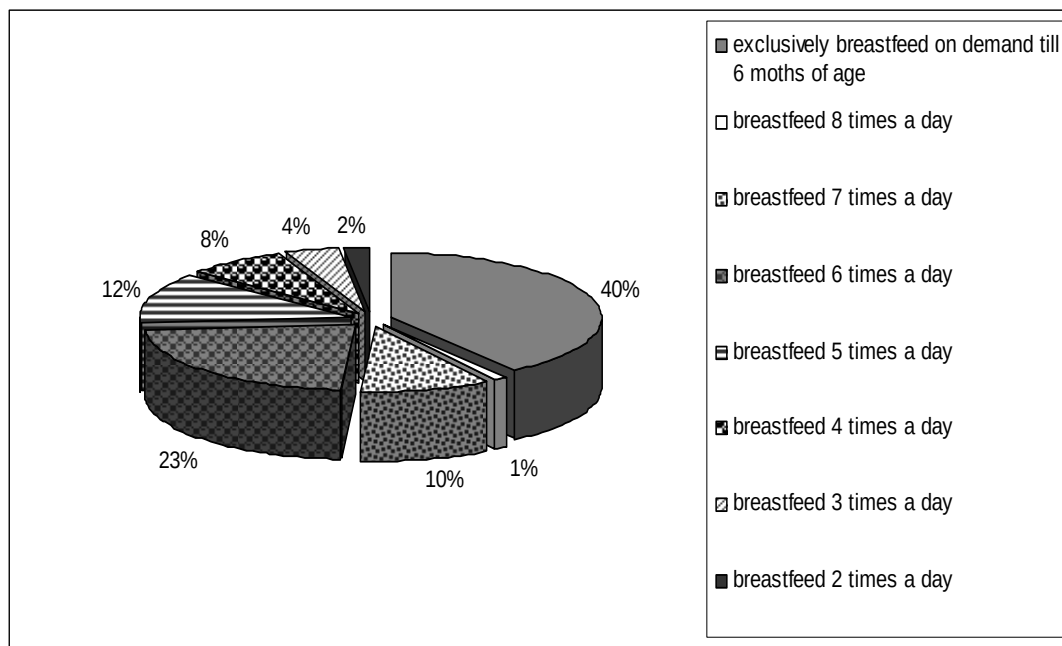


Figure 4. GPs' recommendations regarding frequency of breastfeeding

The most common reasons which lead to breastfeeding discontinuation are shown on **Figure 5** (GPs gave more than one answer). To establish the real reason for breastfeeding discontinuation is difficult because the causes are multiple, overlapping and interdependent (5). Medical problems with breasts like

mastitis, sore nipples, hollow nipples and insufficient motivation of mothers most often lead to stop breastfeeding – 77% and 73%. The percentage of insufficient knowledge of mothers about breastfeeding is high – 45%. The problem of insufficient breast milk is only observed in 4% of the mothers.

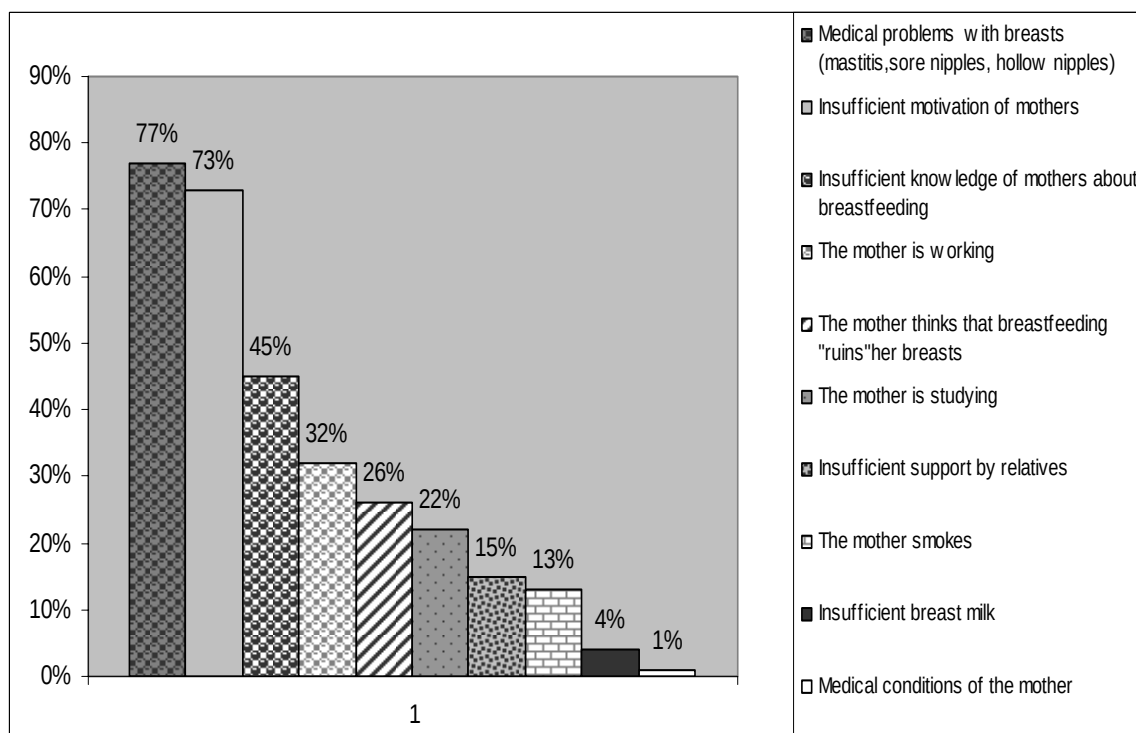


Figure 5. Reasons for breastfeeding discontinuation according to GPs

CONCLUSION

Breastfeeding is the optimal method of infant feeding. It is of great public health importance and it must be encouraged and supported by medical professionals, a more efficient system of counseling, and more frequent use of the news media, especially television, to propagate breastfeeding in the community (7, 12, 13). General practitioners have a unique role in the promotion of breastfeeding. They understand the advantages of family-centered care and are well positioned to provide breastfeeding support in that context. Because they provide comprehensive care to the whole family, family physicians have an opportunity to provide breastfeeding education and support throughout the life cycle to all members of the family (3, 7, 8, 10). General practitioner must recommend breastfeeding for the first six months of life and during pregnancy needs to inform the young mothers about the benefits of breastfeeding and how to prepare the breasts. General Practitioner is in an ideal position to provide information, support and encouragement for breastfeeding women.

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