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Does the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) Make a Difference in Ireland?

INTRODUCTION

The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) is a global programme of WHO and UNICEF launched in the early 1990s and active in over 152 countries. The initiative aims to support babies to get the optimal start in life by providing a healthcare environment in which breastfeeding supportive practices are the norm. The BFHI includes a structured process of self-appraisal, planning for improvement, external assessment, designation and on-going monitoring using global standards and assessment tools.¹ The BFHI started in Ireland in 1998 as a programme of the Health Promoting Hospitals Network.² Participation in the initiative is a recommendation of Department of Health strategies since 1994³ and a key indicator in the national Breastfeeding Strategic Action Plan.⁴ Studies in other countries have indicated that the BFHI makes a difference;⁵⁻⁸ this study examines the effect in Ireland.

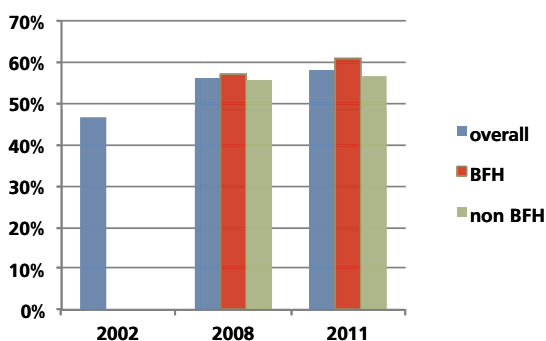
METHODOLOGY

All 20 maternity facilities return infant feeding rates annually to the BFHI national co-ordinator. Reporting categories varied over time and the term “any breastfeeding” refers to exclusive breastfeeding (Bf) and partial breastfeeding combined at the time of discharge. By 2008 6 facilities had attained the standards to be designated as Baby-Friendly (BFH), and in 2011, 35% of infants were born in one of the maternity facilities designated as Baby-Friendly.

RESULTS

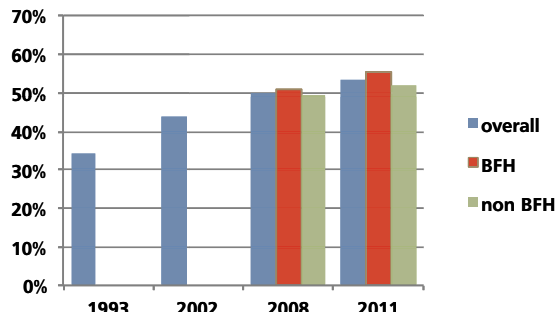
Nationally breastfeeding rates have risen. In 2011, about 58% or 43,000 infants started their life with mother’s milk for immune functioning and nutrition as well as warmth and closeness. Breastfeeding initiation is more likely in a hospital meeting the standards and designated as a Baby-Friendly Hospital and between 2008 and 2011 the overall increase appears to be largely attributed to the BFHI (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Breastfeeding Initiation



Any breastfeeding at discharge has also risen and again the rise is more noticed in a BFH (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Breastfeeding on Discharge



CONCLUSIONS

The maternity units who have been assessed as achieving the Baby-Friendly standards include both large urban academic units and smaller rural units and are outwardly similar in the populations that they serve. The practices of the BFHI are evidence-based and recognized as best practice for over two decades.⁹⁻¹³ While changes in rates can provide some information; it may be more enlightening to examine the leadership in maternity facilities and what facilitates the implementation and sustaining of the practices and participation in a quality initiative such as the BFHI.

REFERENCES

Available on request.

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For further information on the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative in Ireland or for any queries with regard to this abstract please e-mail bfhi@iol.ie