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Neonatal mortality, breastfeeding practices and popular common sense

ABSTRACT

Despite a proven inverse relationship between breastfeeding within one hour of birth and neonatal mortality, breastfeeding in India is marked by delayed initiation and a limited period of exclusive breastfeeding. This appears to be 'popular common sense', but it is not good sense, as it normalises the delayed initiation of breastfeeding. Narratives in the form of popular common sense perceptions around breastfeeding practices, were collected from Muslim women living in three different urban centres and regions of India — Haldwani, Nainital, Uttarakhand (north); Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh (centre) and Hyderabad, Telangana (south). 'Popular common sense' is used as a theoretical lens to understand how breastfeeding rituals are sanctified as normal and natural in popular perceptions. The diversity, intricacies, and cultural embeddedness of breastfeeding practices are explored and elaborated. It is argued that for promoting early and exclusive breastfeeding, it is important that public health professionals understand and negotiate 'popular common sense' perceptions on breastfeeding practices.

Keywords: *Breastfeeding; colostrum; prelacteal feeds; Muslim women; common sense*

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INTRODUCTION

'First *Azaan* (Muslim's prayer call) is recited in the ear of newborn then honey is given and then only breastfeeding is initiated ... I don't know why it is given', told a young mother laughingly. They do not know 'why' but they perform these rituals without fail, before initiating breastfeeding. How are these popular common sense perceptions or popular knowledge perceptions so fundamental to breastfeeding? To understand this, we need to explore the dominant socio-cultural constructions around breastfeeding and their uncritical acceptance in society as normal and natural in the form of popular common sense perceptions. Here, we endeavour to understand breastfeeding as a social and cultural phenomenon and demystify the ways in which breastfeeding practices are negotiated and made operational.

Human milk directly contributes to the infant's innate immunity. New findings clarify the multifunctional nature of human milk bioactive components and the

potential effects of human milk on the infant that will never be possible with milk formulas (Cacho & Lawrence, 2017). The composition of human milk is dynamic with significant change from colostrum, transitional to mature milk. There is only a small volume of colostrum produced (from birth through the first 5 days of lactation), rich in leukocytes, protein, human milk oligosaccharides, bioactive factors, colony-stimulating growth factor and antioxidants (Ballard & Morrow, 2013). Early and exclusive breastfeeding play a vital role in protecting the infant against infections and providing a wide range of benefits for mothers, including the reduced risk of post-partum haemorrhage (UNICEF, 2018; WHO, 2018a; O'Brien, Myles & Pritchard, 2016). Epidemiological studies have shown that breastfeeding contributes to a significant reduction in mortality and morbidity, provides protection against intestinal and respiratory infections as well as malocclusion. It also increases in intelligence and there is probable reduction in overweight and diabetes (Edmond et al., 2006; Victora et al., 2016).