



Bainne Beatha

Healthcare Professional Bias Regarding Infant Feeding: A Secondary Analysis Exploring Maternal Perceptions of the Irish Healthcare System

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Bias and Infant Feeding in the Irish Healthcare System

- **Bias** is defined as an attitude that projects favourable or unfavourable dispositions towards people/groups of people, often involving associating characteristics with a particular behaviour (Meidert et al., 2023).
- Amongst the Irish population, **formula is primarily the norm** (Mc Evoy et al., 2025).
- This can effect healthcare through individual **HCP-mother interactions** which provide an important opportunity for support (Mc Evoy et al., 2025).
- Additionally, from a **systemic perspective**, reliance on formula continues to be perpetuated by the Irish Healthcare system itself (Philip et al., 2023)(Saluja et al., 2021).



Methodology: Data Used

Data used were pre-collected from an online, national survey that was carried out in collaboration between TU Dublin and Bainne Beatha (Bainne Beatha et al., 2022).

Eligible participants included primary parents of children born in Ireland between 2019-2021, who **had breastfed/considered breastfeeding**.

Data were gathered using an online questionnaire on the SurveyMonkey™ platform between January 24th, 2022, and February 15th, 2022.

The survey received **5,412 eligible responses**.



Data used included **4,695** of 5,412 participants that provided **23,893 responses** to relevant qualitative questions



Responses were organised and imported into **NVivo v.14**, using Microsoft Excel

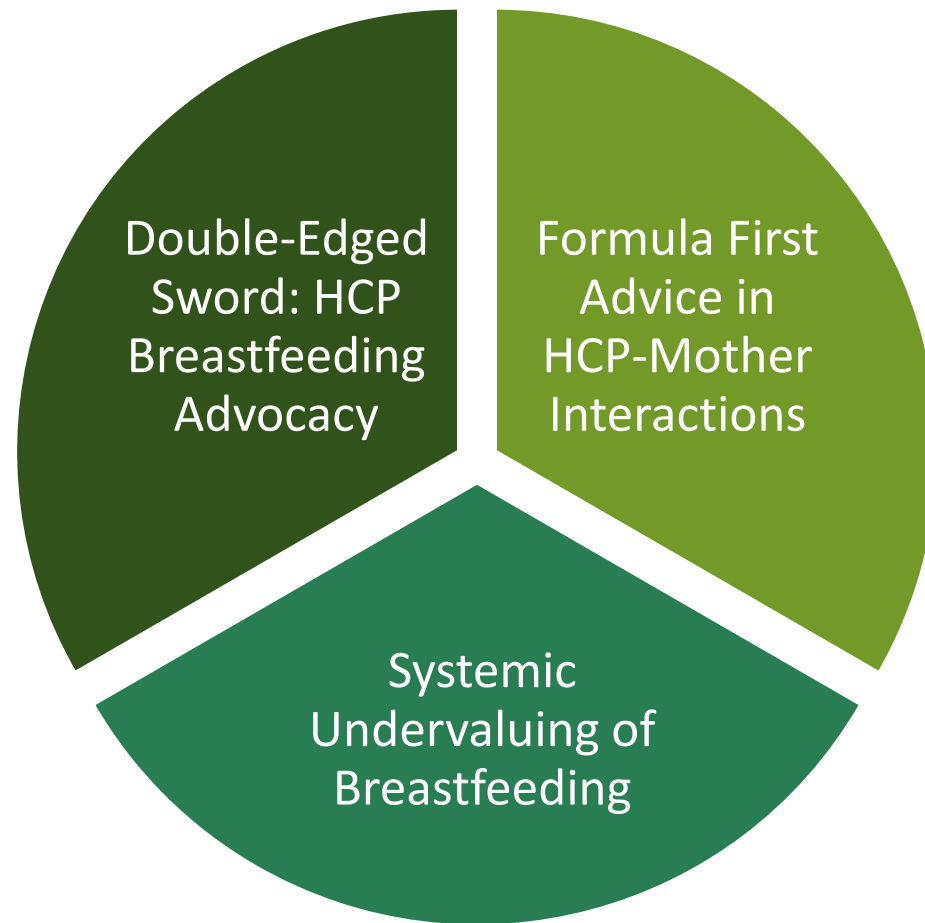


Data were analysed using **Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun et al., 2022) from an **interpretivist viewpoint** (Dudovskiy, 2025)

Methodology: Qualitative Data Analysis

Maternal perception of bias
from HCPs in favour of
breastfeeding and against
formula

Bias in favour of formula and
against breastfeeding within
the Irish healthcare system as
a whole



Maternal perception of bias
from HCPs against
breastfeeding and in favour of
formula

Results & Discussion

Theme 1

Double-Edged Sword: HCP Breastfeeding Advocacy

Bias towards Breastfeeding

*“midwives were **superb- very encouraging** and helpful. Without them I may not have continued to feed” - (BB1614)*

*“...**didn't want** to tell the group it was demanding **in case we ladies chose not to [breastfeed]** because of her honesty!” - (BB1434)*

*“**immense guilt and pressure** from professionals.” - (BB2514)*

*“Many women feel they are doing something wrong or it didn't work for them when some of these struggles arise. **They can stop because of this- or don't think they'll overcome it.**” - (BB1706)*

Theme 1

Double-Edged Sword: HCP Breastfeeding Advocacy

Bias against Formula

*"I was **not given formula** when I asked for it despite my baby crying with hunger" - (BB2396)*

*"...told I must love myself more than I loved my baby if I wasn't going to keep trying to breastfeed."
- (B2833)*

*"I had **got into the swing with formula** and PHN tried her best to get me to try BF. I felt [I] had spent far [too] long in hospital without trying [**I didn't**] want to change now." - (BB2832)*

Theme 2

Formula First Advice in HCP-Mother Interactions

Bias towards Formula

*"formula is **easy** so let's just go with that" - (BB1749)*

*"...a lot of healthcare professionals **just assume** you will formula feed." - (BB2873)*

*"...were used to **bully me into formula** with the threat that they would be sent to special care otherwise." - (BB1041)*

*"...son was given formula at the hospital **despite my expressed wish to breastfeed**" - (BB1668)*

*"...formula was very much top pick especially since a trolley comes around everyday with free formula bottles and if you **choose to breastfeed** you're pretty much **left to fend for yourself**" - (BB3267)*

Theme 2

Formula First Advice in HCP- Mother Interactions

Bias against Breastfeeding

*"If they **don't appreciate it's benefits** then they aren't in a position to care enough to take the time to help." - (BB2695)*

*"I was **spoiling the baby** when I mentioned that I just gave him the boob anytime he cried." - (BB2818)*

*"I **asked for assistance** with breastfeeding positions as the only one I could do was the least suitable given I'd just had a section. I **was told to stop complaining as there were other women who had far more pressing concerns.**" - (BB3434)*

*"...said baby was a big baby and was hungry and that **breastfeeding alone would not be enough**" – (BB2105)*

*"[Breastfeeding] is **not prioritised**. And perhaps that is a **larger decision that has been made by the health system** in that other issues are prioritised instead." - (BB1959)*

*"formula is **promoted and handed out freely**" - (BB3696)*

*"I come from country where...**Formula** is only there as a back up- as **opposed to Ireland where it seems to be the norm**" – (BB2567)*

Theme 3

Systemic Undervaluing of Breastfeeding

Bias towards Formula

*"Formula companies basically have a **direct line into maternity wards** It's **INSANE**" - (BB4323)*

*“Individual midwives try their best to help but the configuration of **the system prevents adequate supports.**” - (BB1884)*

*“**really lucky** and had what ideally would be available to all.” - (BB1232)*

*“Advice given by midwives depends so much on what **midwife you get.** Their training is very uneven.” - (BB1634)*

Theme 3

Systemic Undervaluing of Breastfeeding

Bias against Breastfeeding

*“The **private market** of osteopathy- tongue tie and lactation support is becoming a bit of a racket **capitalising on normal BF challenges...**” - (BB4094)*

Key Takeaways

Bias is present within the Irish healthcare system **both for/against breastfeeding** and **for/against formula**, creating an overall **lack of consistency** and unified information.

Have to **'get lucky'** to receive care from HCPs that have biases and preferences that align with the mother's.

Highlights a need for **consistent, individualised support** in infant feeding.

Presence of bias primarily contributes to **overall maternal dissatisfaction**.

References

