

ELECTRONIC VERSION OF THESIS ABSTRACT

Author: Scott William Smith, D.O.

Profession: Medical Doctor

Year: 2014

Thesis Title: Maasai Butterfat Fed Babies, A Pilot Qualitative Study of the Infant Supplemental Feeding Practices and Beliefs of the Maasai Living in the Longido District of Tanzania.

Research Country: Tanzania

Key Words: Supplemental feeding. Prelacteal feeding. Butterfat.

Research Institution: Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin

Supervisor: Mary Wickenden, PhD

ABSTRACT

Problem Statement:

This study was undertaken to investigate the infant feeding practices and beliefs of the Maasai living in rural Northern Tanzania. The fact that butterfat is fed to the babies is common knowledge, but the extent of this practice has not been investigated in this population. The local medical community has concerns with this practice believing that it is implicated in childhood pneumonia and diarrhea. WHO recommends exclusive breast-feeding for infants until six months of age, viewing studies which indicate supplemental feedings are responsible for increased incidence of diarrheal and respiratory problems.

Methods:

Generic Qualitative Inquiry using semi-structured interviews, FGD's, observation, medical record reviews and short interviews were used to obtain data from two villages in rural Tanzania. Data was evaluated using Thematic Analysis.

Findings:

Prelacteal and supplemental feedings to infants by the Maasai were found to be extensively practiced. These feedings which were almost exclusively butterfat, were initiated on the day of birth and continued for two to three years. The majority of the informants denied any detrimental health effects to their babies from this practice. Although this practice has been a tradition for as long as can be remembered, the butterfat is believed to make the baby gain weight and grow strong.

Discussion:

There is a strong sense of community tradition with the Maasai. Butterfat feeding to infants is just one of many customs which is strongly ingrained in their culture. Cultural change can only occur when there is evidence that the practice is harmful. Members of the community are the most effective components to initiate change.

Conclusion:

Further studies must be done with the Maasai communities of Tanzania using quantitative methods to investigate the incidence of morbidity and mortality related to supplemental butterfat feedings to infants. With this data, health care workers can be better informed to communicate and educate mothers in healthy infant feeding practices.