

Establishment and Evaluation of a Nurse-Led Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit in a Tertiary Care Teaching Hospital

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Abstract

Background: Breastfeeding is a cornerstone of preventive maternal and child health care, offering substantial short- and long-term benefits to both mother and infant. Despite strong global and national recommendations, optimal breastfeeding practices remain suboptimal due to inadequate counseling, lack of structured institutional support, and insufficient follow-up during antenatal and postnatal periods.

Objectives: To describe the establishment of the Maatru Sparsha Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit and to evaluate its utilization and outcomes among antenatal and postnatal mothers.

Methods: A descriptive observational study with a retrospective program evaluation approach was conducted in a tertiary care teaching hospital. Universal sampling was adopted to include all antenatal and postnatal mothers who utilized services of the Maatru Sparsha unit from its inception until December 2016. Data were collected using standardized case sheets and referral formats developed for the unit. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used for data analysis.

Results: A total of 1,146 antenatal mothers were registered under the Maatru Sparsha unit, indicating high utilization of breastfeeding counseling services. Postnatal follow-up data were available for 60 mothers. High antenatal service uptake and positive maternal responses indicated acceptability and feasibility of the intervention. Mothers demonstrated improved awareness of breastfeeding practices and increased confidence in managing common breastfeeding challenges.

Conclusion: The Maatru Sparsha unit was found to be an effective nurse-led breastfeeding support and counseling model that strengthened antenatal and postnatal maternal care services. This structured, data-driven approach supports preventive maternal health and has the potential to be replicated in similar health-care and nursing education settings.

Keywords: breastfeeding; counseling; maternal health; nursing intervention; antenatal care; postnatal care

Introduction

Breastfeeding is universally recognized as the optimal method of infant feeding and a fundamental determinant of maternal and child health. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes breastfeeding as the first act of preventive medicine, emphasizing its role in reducing infant morbidity and mortality while promoting maternal health and well-being. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, followed by continued

breastfeeding with appropriate complementary feeding, is strongly recommended.

Despite these recommendations, breastfeeding practices often remain inadequate due to multiple factors, including insufficient antenatal preparation, lack of skilled professional support, sociocultural misconceptions, and limited postnatal follow-up. These gaps underscore the need for structured, facility-based breastfeeding support services.

Nurses play a pivotal role in breastfeeding promotion owing to their sustained interaction with mothers across antenatal, intrapartum, and postnatal periods. Nurse-led breastfeeding counseling units can provide consistent, evidence-based education and emotional support. Recognizing this need, the *Maatru Sparsha* Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit was established as a dedicated service aimed at strengthening breastfeeding practices through structured counseling, standardized documentation, and systematic follow-up.

Objectives

1. To describe the establishment and organizational framework of the *Maatru Sparsha* Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit.
2. To assess utilization of breastfeeding counseling services by antenatal and postnatal mothers.
3. To evaluate maternal responses to breastfeeding counseling and support services.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

Descriptive observational study with a retrospective program evaluation approach.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at the *Maatru Sparsha* Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit established at SDM College of Medical Sciences and Hospital, Dharwad, Karnataka, India, in collaboration with the SDM Institute of Nursing Sciences, a constituent institution of Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara University. The unit functions within the maternal health services of the tertiary care teaching hospital and is primarily coordinated by nursing faculty and trained nursing personnel. The setting provides comprehensive antenatal and postnatal care services to mothers from both urban and rural backgrounds.

Study Population

Antenatal and postnatal mothers who availed services of the *Maatru Sparsha* Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit during the study period.

Sample Size

A total of 1,206 mothers were included, comprising 1,146 antenatal mothers and 60 postnatal mothers who received follow-up services.

Sampling Technique

Universal sampling of all registered beneficiaries during the study period.

Description of the Intervention

The *Maatru Sparsha* unit was established as a nurse-led breastfeeding support and counseling service with clearly defined objectives, staffing patterns, and service components. Services included antenatal breastfeeding education, postnatal breastfeeding support, and referral for mothers requiring additional care.

Tools for Data Collection

- Standardized case sheet developed for the *Maatru Sparsha* unit
- Standardized referral sheet to ensure continuity of maternal care

Data Collection Period

From the establishment of the unit until December 2025.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional permission was obtained prior to the study. As the study involved retrospective evaluation of routine service data without direct participant intervention, formal institutional ethics committee approval was waived. All data were anonymized prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarize service utilization and maternal responses.

Results

Category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Antenatal mothers	1146	95.0
Postnatal mothers (follow-up)	60	5.0
Total	1206	100

Table 1: Distribution of Mothers Registered under Maatru Sparsha Unit (Study period: till December 2025)

Service	Mothers Utilized (n)	Remarks
Antenatal breastfeeding counseling	1146	High utilization
Postnatal breastfeeding support	60	Limited follow-up
Referral services	As required	Based on individual need

Table 2: Utilization of Services Provided by Maatru Sparsha Unit

Response Indicator	Outcome
Acceptance of breastfeeding education	Good
Awareness of correct techniques	Improved
Confidence in breastfeeding	Increased
Ability to manage breastfeeding problems	Improved

Table 3: Maternal Response to Breastfeeding Counseling Services

Parameter	Antenatal	Postnatal
Registration under unit	High	Low
Counseling participation	High	Moderate
Follow-up continuity	Not applicable	Limited

Table 4: Comparison of Antenatal and Postnatal Service Engagement

The distribution and utilization of services under the *Maatru Sparsha* unit are presented in Tables 1–4. Antenatal mothers constituted the majority of beneficiaries. Service utilization was higher during the antenatal period compared to postnatal follow-up, and maternal responses to breastfeeding counseling were largely positive.

Discussion

The findings suggest that a structured, nurse-led breastfeeding support and counseling unit can enhance utilization of maternal health services. High antenatal participation reflects strong acceptance of facility-based breastfeeding counseling.

Consistent with existing literature, structured counseling and professional support were associated with improved maternal confidence and breastfeeding practices. The *Maatru Sparsha* model aligns with WHO and national guidelines emphasizing institutional responsibility in breastfeeding promotion. Standardized documentation strengthened continuity of care and facilitated systematic program evaluation.

Conclusion

The *Maatru Sparsha* Breastfeeding Support and Counseling Unit was found to be an effective nurse-led intervention for strengthening antenatal and postnatal maternal care services. High utilization, positive maternal responses, and improved continuity of care highlight its value as a preventive maternal health initiative. This model has the potential to be replicated across similar tertiary care hospitals and nursing institutions.

Implications for Nursing Practice

- Reinforces the leadership role of nurses in breastfeeding promotion
- Enhances preventive maternal and child health services
- Supports implementation of WHO-recommended breastfeeding practices

- Encourages structured documentation and continuity of maternal care

Limitations

The study was conducted in a single institution, and the limited postnatal follow-up sample size may restrict generalizability of postnatal outcomes.

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