

# NURSES' PERCEPTION OF BREASTFEEDING IN THE IMMEDIATE PUERPERIUM

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## PERCEPÇÃO DAS ENFERMEIRAS SOBRE O ALEITAMENTO MATERNO NO PUERPÉRIO IMEDIATO

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## PERCEPCIÓN DE LAS ENFERMERAS SOBRE LA LACTANCIA MATERNA EN EL INMEDIATO PUERPERIO

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**Objective:** to analyze the nurses' perception of breastfeeding orientation in the immediate postpartum period. **Method:** descriptive and exploratory field research, with a qualitative approach, carried out with 13 professionals graduated in care and obstetric nursing from a maternity hospital of a public hospital in the city of Salvador, Bahia. **Results:** the nurses showed two main complications: breast breach and engorgement and highlighted the orientation from prenatal to puerperium. The facilitating factor of the orientation was the benefits of breastfeeding and the hindering factor was the high demand for work for nursing professionals. **Conclusion:** the nurses perceived the puerperium as protagonists and affirmed that the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the difficulties experienced.

**Descriptors:** Breast Feeding. Obstetric Nursing. Health Education.

*Objetivo: analisar a percepção das enfermeiras sobre a orientação do aleitamento materno no puerpério imediato. Método: pesquisa de campo, descritiva e exploratória, com abordagem qualitativa, realizada com 13 profissionais graduados em enfermagem assistencial e obstétrica de uma maternidade de um hospital público na cidade de Salvador, no estado da Bahia. Resultados: as enfermeiras evidenciaram duas complicações principais: fissura e ingurgitamento mamário e ressaltaram a orientação desde o pré-natal até o puerpério. O fator facilitador da orientação foram os benefícios da amamentação e o dificultador foi a alta demanda laboral para as profissionais de enfermagem. Conclusão: as enfermeiras perceberam as puérperas como protagonistas e afirmaram que os benefícios da amamentação superam as dificuldades vivenciadas.*

*Descritores: Aleitamento Materno. Enfermagem Obstétrica. Educação em Saúde.*

*Objetivo: analizar la percepción de las enfermeras sobre la orientación a la lactancia materna en el posparto inmediato. Método: investigación de campo descriptiva y exploratoria, con enfoque cualitativo, realizada con 13 profesionales graduados en enfermería obstétrica de un hospital materno de un hospital público de la ciudad de Salvador, Bahía. Resultados: las enfermeras mostraron dos complicaciones principales: hendidura y congestión mamaria y enfatizaron la orientación de prenatal a puerperio. El factor facilitador de la orientación fueron los beneficios de la lactancia materna y el factor obstaculizador fue la alta demanda de trabajo para los profesionales*

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*de enfermería. Conclusión: las enfermeras percibieron a los puerperios como protagonistas y afirmaron que los beneficios de la lactancia materna superan las dificultades experimentadas.*

*Descriptores: Lactancia Materna. Enfermería Obstétrica. Educación en Salud.*

## Introduction

According to the *Ministério da Saúde* (MS), breastfeeding (BF) is defined as a physiological and economic tool that involves deep interaction between mother and child, causing affection and protection. In addition to nourishing and promoting positive results in the child's immune system, it favors the reduction of morbidity and mortality and also helps in its cognitive and emotional development. Moreover, breastfeeding promotes beneficial effects to the mother, such as protection against diseases such as cancers, diabetes *Mellitus* and gestational, anemia in the puerperium, among others<sup>(1-2)</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) brings the definitions of the various types of breastfeeding, namely: breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding (EBF), predominant breastfeeding, complementary breastfeeding and, finally, mixed or partial breastfeeding<sup>(1)</sup>.

However, even though it is a natural process, breastfeeding is often a challenge, since it requires a series of learnings related to breast care, milking, picks, positioning, among other demands that often end up leaving mothers confused and discredited that they are able to breastfeed. Considering that each person is unique, it takes time to adapt between mother and child, both in terms of anatomy and habit, because babies demand repeated breastfeeding during the day and at night, and this generates maternal exhaustion. In addition, there are also complications related to breastfeeding, such as fissures, engorgement, mastitis and others, which end up leading the mother to give up breastfeeding, when there is no professional support to face doubts and problems<sup>(3)</sup>.

In this sense, nursing, as a profession of care, is an important part, since it accompanies the entire pregnancy, delivery and puerperium, in

addition to the care of the baby. Thus, nurses have a large space of professional performance to act not only on complications, but also to guide the demands of adaptation since the first feeding. In this context, it is necessary that there is constant training in this theme, aimed at nursing professionals, so that they can continue to provide their care in a scientific, updated and efficient way for both mother and child. It is also pertinent that nurses seek improvement of communication techniques to favor the learning of what is taught to women<sup>(4-5)</sup>.

After this pertinent information, the present work is justified by the great social relevance, as well as also allows to show the importance of these professionals in view of the guidelines to the EBF. In this sense, it is clarified that the theme in question arose from a personal concern, when, in some observations made in a high-risk maternity hospital in the city of Salvador (BA), it was possible to perceive the lack of this information on the part of the nursing professionals. Therefore, the need for the development of this study arose, due to the importance of these guidelines, which, in turn, provide great benefits for the mother/child binomial.

Moreover, the value of this study, in the individual sphere, allows to add knowledge about this theme, promoting personal and professional growth. Practical relevance applies in the search for these orientations by professionals, thus enabling the adoption of new practices, generating knowledge and awareness of both professionals and pregnant women and puerperum.

Finally, the importance of this theme is also highlighted, since mother and child are benefited from the simple act of breastfeeding, which is why nursing professionals should be encouraged

to adopt an appropriate conduct related to guidance and disseminate this information.

Thus, the following question arose: What is the importance of breastfeeding guidance, from the point of view of nursing professionals?

Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the perception of nurses about the orientation of breastfeeding in the puerperium.

## Method

For the consolidation of this study, a descriptive and exploratory field research was carried out, with a qualitative approach, based on the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)<sup>(6)</sup>. Data collection occurred via the Internet, according to the guidance of the National Research Ethics Commission (CONEP)<sup>(7)</sup>, directly with the target audience, in compliance with coronavirus disease prevention measures (COVID-19). In this aspect, a semi-structured questionnaire was applied with objective and subjective questions, made available to nurses, through a Link from Google Forms, during the period from July to August 2020. In the opportunity of the invitation to participate in the research, the Informed Consent Form (ICF) was also made available.

The research was aimed at professionals graduated in care and obstetric nursing from a high-risk maternity hospital in the city of Salvador, Bahia state. As inclusion criteria, higher education professionals with a minimum performance of 6 months in the locus of study were able to participate. Professionals who were not directly linked to care were excluded from the study, such as nursing coordination and teachers. In addition, undergraduate or resident students were not included, due to the short time of professional experience in the area.

After completing the questionnaires by the participants, the information collected was transcribed in full for the Microsoft Word 2010 software. Subsequently, the data were processed in the Software Interface de R pour les *Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IREBUTEQ), through

the techniques of word cloud and similarity analysis, because both allow the words to be separated, grouped or highlighted, according to the occurrence and proximity of sense nuclei. In order to avoid the highlighting of words that did not add meaning to the research, before processing, the following classes of words were removed from the answers: indefinite and supplementary adjectives, defined and undefined articles, prepositions and the word "no". For the analysis of the processed data, the Content Analysis technique, proposed by Bardin<sup>(8)</sup>, was used, which allowed the creation of thematic categories. After the formation of the images generated by the software and the creation of the thematic groups, the research findings were formed, being confronted with the scientific evidence on the theme.

The study was developed in accordance with the guidelines and research standards involving human beings, resolution n. 466/2012, of the *Conselho Nacional de Saúde* (CNS) and in line with CNS Resolution n. 580/2018, which deals with research of strategic interests for the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS), efficiently and without charges for the public health system. The project was submitted to *Plataforma Brasil* and to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the locus hospital of the study for analysis. After approval, under Opinion n. 4.139.414, data collection began.

The research was developed after careful reading of the Informed Consent, which was signed in two ways. In addition, the benefits of this study were communicated, such as deepening of knowledge about breastfeeding, which will provide greater scientific visibility of nursing, as well as the theme in question. Another benefit is the possibility of this study detecting and providing means to improve nursing care related to breastfeeding. Therefore, there will also be the possibility of positive impact on patients assisted by these participating professionals.

It is noteworthy that there was no risk to the physical, psychic, intellectual, moral, social and cultural integrity of the participants. As protective measures, the information collected will be protected as to the loss. Confidentiality

related to names or any other information that could identify them has also been ensured. It was clarified that the completed questionnaires are the responsibility of the author, but the results of the research will be disseminated, preserving the identity and integrity of the participants, through the omission of their names.

## Results and Discussion

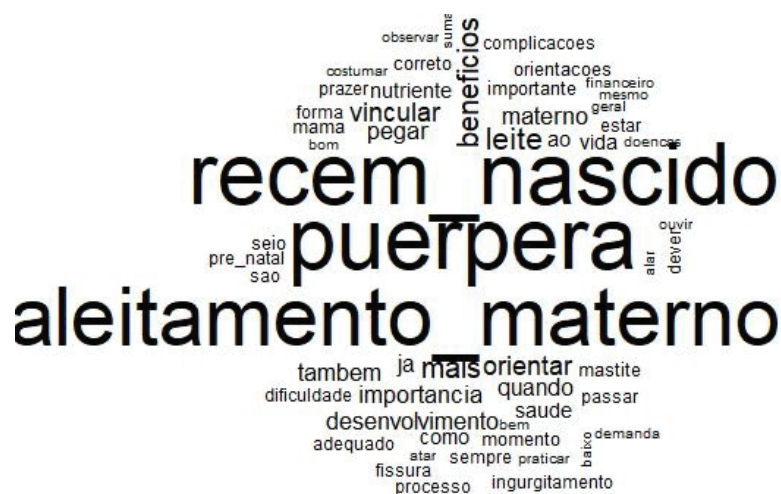
Of the 30 nursing graduates of the Obstetric Center of the Roberto Santos General Hospital, only 13 accepted the invitation and met the eligibility criteria for participation in the study, composing the final sample. In addition, during the period of application of the questionnaire, there was a great change in the number of professionals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing the ineligibility of many research participants, according to the exclusion criteria. Of the nursing graduates eligible for the study, 12 were female and only 1 male. In view of this fact, the terminology "nurses" was adopted for the study participants. In addition, it is important to highlight the representativeness of women in the nursing profession and in childbirth care, from midwives to obstetric nurses and obstetricians, as evidenced in studies<sup>(9-10)</sup>.

In addition, it was also evidenced that 12 nurses had specialization in obstetrics and

only one was part of the nursing staff. This fact is positive, since the institution is transforming the profile of professionals for those who have specialization in obstetrics and have technical and legal training to assist pregnant women, women giving birth and puerperal women in an integral way. In this sense, the care provided becomes more complete and of higher quality, since obstetric nursing brings with it, in addition to technical-scientific knowledge, good delivery care practices, ensuring satisfaction of clients and companions<sup>(11-12)</sup>.

The nurses' answers in the semi-structured questionnaire were read exhaustively, which allowed the creation of four thematic categories – nurses' understanding of the importance of breastfeeding in the immediate puerperium; Understanding the role of women in breastfeeding as a facilitator in the orientation process; Challenges to promote quality guidance; Identification of complications in breastfeeding for a problem-resolution orientation – according to the content analysis technique proposed by Bardin<sup>(8)</sup>. In addition, simultaneously, the responses were released in the IREBUTEQ software and also themed and organized in nuclei of similar meanings, as shown in Figure 1, as follows:

**Figure 1** – Word cloud of semi-structured questionnaire responses



Source: Created by the authors.

### Category 1 – Nurses' understanding of the importance of breastfeeding in the immediate postpartum period

Figure 1 shows the highlight for three terms “*recém\_nascido*”, “*aleitamento\_materno*” and “*puérpera*”, the latter being the central axis of the terms. It turns out that in the word cloud, the terms that are higher are the ones that had the highest frequency of repetitions in the texts. In this sense, it is noticeable, according to the nurses' answers, that the central element of breastfeeding is the puerperal, and that related to these ideas, the newborn is also present.

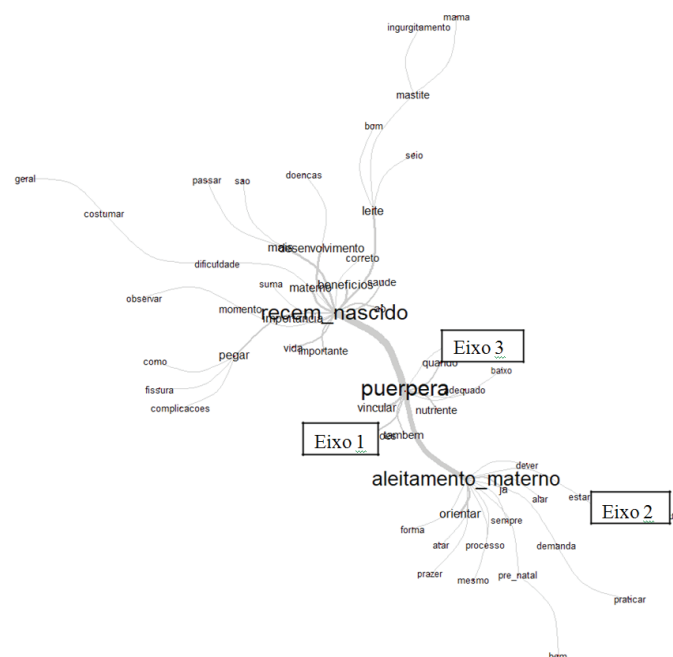
Thus, the nurses understand that the puerperal women are the main protagonist of breastfeeding, and that it is directly linked to the newborn. Thus, this association made by nurses is positive, since, instead of prioritizing only breastfeeding or the baby, they understand the woman as the main focus of care, not only directed to the child or the act of breastfeeding, but is seen holistically. The other terms, although featured, are seen in the background. This fact contributes to more pleasurable breastfeeding and causes the complications that are common

during the breastfeeding process to be overcome more efficiently, resulting from nursing work<sup>(13)</sup>.

Another observation based on the word cloud is the highlight of terms such as “*benefícios*”, “*leite materno*”, “*vincular*”, “*nutriente*”, “*orientar*”, “*importância*”, “*desenvolvimento*”. Despite being in smaller sizes, they still have relief and permeate the universe of nurses' ideas about breastfeeding in the immediate puerperium. It is important to visualize that all terms lead to the understanding that breast milk brings several benefits besides nutritious, which promote the development of the baby, but it is also fundamental for establishing the bond between the mother and child binomial. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the guidance performed by nursing about these benefits is fundamental for ensuring effective breastfeeding<sup>(13-14)</sup>.

For a more detailed analysis of the answers of the research participants, in addition to Bardin's analysis<sup>(8)</sup>, we also used the analysis of similarity, which aggregates into branches ideas that permeate nuclei of similar senses and trace stronger or weaker connections, according to the frequency and semantic approximation between the concepts (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** – Tree of Similitude of the answers to the semi-structured questionnaire on the nurses' conception of the importance of breastfeeding during the immediate postpartum period



Source: Created by the authors.

## Category 2 - Understanding the role of women in breastfeeding as a facilitator in the orientation process

To facilitate understanding and discussion regarding the analysis of Figure 2, the central terms were divided into three lexical axes. In the analysis of Axis 1 of the Similitudes Tree (puerperal woman), it was noted that it is the central term of the study and that the two other axes emerge from it, which demonstrates that, for nurses, the puerperal woman is the main figure of breastfeeding. In this sense, the finding is positive, because, by emphasizing the puerperum as a central factor in the issues that permeate breastfeeding, nursing can promote care actions that, supported by scientific and practical subsidies, favor the active participation of women for knowledge, the perception of alterations and the making of conscious decisions about breastfeeding, thus strengthening the adhering to this practice, as evidenced in a study<sup>(15)</sup>.

A research<sup>(16)</sup> of integrative review, which evaluated the importance of guidance on breastfeeding in the immediate puerperium, demonstrated a divergence of findings in relation to those found in this study. According to these authors, there was a distance between the professionals and the puerperal woman. In this study, we perceived a close relationship between nurses and puerperal women, found in the participants' eyes with a focus on women, which brings these two characters closer and enables an interlocution of knowledge, knowledge production and overcoming difficulties, through a shared therapeutic plan.

Still related to the term "*puérpera*", a smaller branch appears on the right with the terms "*nutriente*", "*adequado*", "*baixo*" and "*financeiro*". These words suggest that, in the understanding of the participating nurses, the main facilitating factor in the process of guidance on breastfeeding, is precisely the benefits provided by this practice. In this sense, it is important to value this information, because breast milk is a source of adequate nutrients and low financial cost, which favors the establishment and permanence

of exclusive breastfeeding, especially for those families with lower income, who are the main users of the *Sistema Único de Saúde*<sup>(1-2)</sup>.

In addition to these factors, another study<sup>(17)</sup> pointed out aspects that promote adhering to exclusive breastfeeding, such as: infant's life time (higher in the first months of life), maternal age (higher among women between 20 and 30 years), marital status (majority with partner), maternal education (majority with high school education), number of pregnancies (higher in the second pregnancy), prenatal care, place of prenatal care (higher, when done at the health center), number of prenatal consultations (higher, when  $\leq 6$  consultations). However, a conflicting finding was found: guidance on exclusive breastfeeding in prenatal care was not decisive for the adhering to this practice, a finding divergent from another study<sup>(18)</sup>. This information is important because they reaffirm the importance of orientation in the immediate postpartum period, regardless of the realization of these orientations in prenatal care.

On the other hand, regarding the difficulties encountered regarding breastfeeding, postpartum women have with them perceptions about breastfeeding resulting from other pregnancies. This fact may negatively influence breastfeeding adhering to breastfeeding. Moreover, the idea that there is little milk production was also seen as a factor for the supply of artificial milk<sup>(19)</sup>. Thus, nurses need to strengthen the orientations on benefits, in addition to paying attention to doubts and promoting qualified listening, demystifying myths and offering strategies to overcome difficulties<sup>(20)</sup>.

In the branch to the left of Axis 1, the term "*vincular*" brings that, in addition to providing nutrients, nurses believe that breastfeeding also promotes a bond between mother and child and reinforces the need for guidance on breastfeeding for the puerperal woman. This fact is in line with the literature, since the bond promoted in the hospital environment, developed in the contact between mother-baby in the first hour of life, humanization of care, promotion of an ambience favorable to the development of the

bond and stimulus to breastfeeding, provides the creation of affective bonds between the binomial, as evidenced in an integrative literature review<sup>(21)</sup>.

It is important to emphasize the maternal benefits of breastfeeding, since many mothers know only the benefits for the baby. In this sense, it is necessary that nursing act in the field of guidance regarding the benefits for the puerperal, such as prevention of breast cancer, postpartum hemorrhages, aid in uterine involution, besides preventing postpartum depression<sup>(22)</sup>.

### Category 3 - Challenges to promote quality guidance

Axis 2 focuses on the term “*aleitamento materno*” and its ramifications. In Axis 1, orientation is an important idea for the interviewees, presented by the term “guide”. Thus, guidance on breastfeeding was seen as an important element regarding nursing care. Despite the recognition of the importance of guidance on the part of the participants, studies<sup>(15-16)</sup> show that, in practice, the guidance is done by the nursing team in most cases, but is still being performed unsatisfactory. In addition, it was found that the knowledge of puerperal women and family members is being underestimated, which decreases the bond between professionals and women.

In addition, other terms were also presented in proximity, such as “*prazer*” and “*processo*”. These bring up the discussion of a dichotomous look on breastfeeding. On the one hand, there is a romanticized view of motherhood, related to the issue of gender, which passes the image of something simple, natural and easy for women, so that many feel frustrated when they are experiencing breastfeeding<sup>(23)</sup>. On the other hand, a study<sup>(15)</sup> approaches that, for some puerperal women, breastfeeding has challenges related to each situation and, therefore, part of an understanding that breastfeeding involves a learning process between mother and child, about positioning, catch, withdrawal, family participation and previous experiences of the postpartum woman. In this context, nursing is necessary to welcome, guide, take care of difficulties and

stimulate progress, without disregarding the knowledge of women and families.

Other branches also found in Axis 2, contain the term “*pré-natal*”. In this sense, the participants understand that it is important to talk about breastfeeding, especially in prenatal care, a time more conducive to dialogue, guidance, clarification of doubts, since, in the immediate postpartum period, the woman is physically and mentally tired and with a large number of information in a short time. However, orientation during prenatal care is not a determining factor in the treatment of exclusive breastfeeding, demonstrating that the external factors already mentioned in this study have a greater influence on this process<sup>(22)</sup>.

Regarding the terms “*sempre*” and “*demanda*”, the nurses emphasized that they were always overwhelmed with other work demands. Thus, the large number of nursing activities was seen as the main complicating factor in the development of professional guidance. This is a challenge that permeates the entire hospital environment and not only the obstetric ward, as seen in a literature review study<sup>(24)</sup>, demonstrating that work overload interferes negatively in the quality of nursing care in the hospital environment.

There are still the terms “*praticar*”, “*dever*”, “*estar*”, “*ouvir*”, mentioned by the nurses, which refer to the teaching-learning process about breastfeeding. Thus, the participants understand that success in breastfeeding comes with practice, but recognize that nursing needs to be present to promote qualified listening, in order to allow continuous support and management on breastfeeding<sup>(19)</sup>. However, there are still flaws in the guidance process and, therefore, many pregnant women use information from digital media and support networks. For this reason, it is necessary to adapt the methodological level of teaching, so that it occurs individually, in addition to the direction of qualified information networks for the promotion of breastfeeding<sup>(18)</sup>.

### Category 4 - Identification of complications in breastfeeding for a resolute orientation

In Axis 3, we find the central term “*recém-nascido*” and, with it, a vast branch of words,

most of them related to complications in breastfeeding. It is noticed that complications are mentioned close to the word “*recém\_nascido*”; this can be attributed to the fact that complications only occur after birth and the sucking stimulus performed by the baby in breastfeeding. As demonstrated in a study<sup>(25)</sup>, the main initial difficulties experienced by both the mother and the newborn with breastfeeding and the impact of these challenges on the duration of exclusive breastfeeding were: inadequate position, response to inefficient breast contact, inadequate hearing, breast problems and affective difficulties. Therefore, it is clear why the nurses related the newborn to complications, given that, from the initial moment of life, it is necessary to adapt between mother and child to perform the correct breastfeeding techniques and, consequently, promotion of physiological feeding without complications.

As for the branches, clockwise, the terms “*vida*” and “*importante*” appear, which demonstrate the appreciation of the newborn's life by professionals. Then, the terms “*importância*”, “*pegar*”, “*fissura*” and “*complicações*” appear, evidencing that the breast sinus is an important demand for these professionals and that, on a recurring basis, they are due to complications related to incorrect latch, such as the fissure. This fact is relevant, since the correct latch is fundamental to ensure the supply of effective breast milk for the baby. In addition, incorrectly latching on brings serious complications, which are determinant for maternal suffering and consequent early weaning<sup>(26)</sup>. As demonstrated in research<sup>(25,27)</sup>, nipple trauma was predominant, it showed the relationship between incorrect latch on and the development of breast traumas, highlighting this event as a factor related to the reduction of the time of exclusive breastfeeding.

Another important branch still in Axis 3 presents terms that initially deal with beneficial points, such as “*benefícios*”, “*saúde*”, “*desenvolvimento*”, “*correto*”, “*doenças*”, “*leite*”, “*bom*”, “*seio*”. All of these deal with the benefits of breastfeeding for the newborn, such as development, health promotion and disease

prevention. It has been known for many years the advantages of breast milk for the newborn, so much so that the WHO and the MS recommend that breastfeeding should be offered exclusively until 6 months of life and after this period in a complementary way<sup>(1-2)</sup>.

When deepening the analysis of the branching of the term “*leite*”, other frequent complications emerged, seen in the words “*mastite*” and “*ingurgitamento*”. Both then related to the descent of milk in the lactoreia, when there is not the complete emptying of the breasts, and symptoms such as edema, pain, heat and breast flushing, in addition to painful milk nodules, fever and even infection, in some cases. These complications were also found in a study<sup>(27)</sup> that brought breast engorgement as the second major complication, in addition to symptoms, such as breast enlargement and pain in 100% of the studied participants. All the complications mentioned end up negatively influencing the process of milking, since they contribute to early weaning and maternal wear in relation to breastfeeding, as well as to the temporary interruption of breastfeeding, besides favoring the introduction of milk formulas, as discussed in the study<sup>(25)</sup>. Thus, the identification of these complications by nurses is essential, so that there is an orientation that meets the needs of the puerperal women.

This study has as limitation the number of participants, a fact that allows making inferences only restricted to the locus of the research.

On the other hand, this work can contribute to improving the quality of the service studied, as well as foster initiatives to improve nursing care. In addition, it is suggested to conduct a broader study that allows the achievement of findings that can be applied in different realities, with this research as a source of contribution to the construction of a production of greater depth.

## Conclusion

Thus, through the application, analysis and development of this study, it was possible



to obtain satisfactory results that contemplated the intended objective. It was noticed that, for the nurses participating in the research, the role of breastfeeding is the postpartum woman, and that the care provided focuses on women. In addition, there was emphasis on nurses' understanding of the benefits of breastfeeding for the newborn and for women, which is not restricted to nutritional need, but also to the strengthening of affective bonds.

It was also found that nurses related breastfeeding to educational practice and guidance to women, centered on the benefits related to breastfeeding. However, they pointed out that work overload and demand for activities interfere in the realization of the guidelines. They highlighted questions related to complications in breastfeeding, recurrent in the daily routine of the team, such as mammary fissure, breast engorgement and mastitis.

However, despite the complications, the participants reaffirmed that the benefits are greater. In the nurses' perception, breastfeeding in the immediate puerperium is beneficial for the mother/child binomial, a fact that is valued by the nursing team, which is perceived as an essential part for welcoming, guiding and encouraging this care practice of care.

### Collaborations:

1 – conception and planning of the project: Cristiane Rodrigues dos Anjos;

2 – analysis and interpretation of data: Cristiane Rodrigues dos Anjos and Carolina Souza de Almeida;

3 – writing and/or critical review: Carolina Souza de Almeida and Carina Marinho Picanço;

4 – approval of the final version: Carina Marinho Picanço.

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