

MED/OP/14

The Psychological Impact on Postpartum Mothers of Neonates Admitted to Premature Baby Units and Neonatal Wards in a Tertiary Care Setting in Sri Lanka

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Background: The admission of neonates to PBUs and neonatal wards is a highly stressful experience that can profoundly affect maternal psychological health, potentially compromising newborn care and creating distress for the family.

Objective: This study explored the psychological impact, contributing factors, and coping strategies of postpartum mothers whose neonates were admitted to PBUs and neonatal wards at Teaching Hospital, Anuradhapura.

Methods: A descriptive, cross-sectional qualitative study was conducted. Postpartum mothers with neonates in PBUs and neonatal wards were recruited using a feasible cluster sampling approach. Data were collected through the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) screening followed by in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Results: Nineteen mothers participated. Thematic analysis revealed three main categories of stressors. Those are neonatal-related concerns such as invasive treatments and uncertainty about prognosis, family-related challenges including limited support and financial strain, and maternal factors such as young age, prolonged hospitalization, and previous adverse obstetric experiences. Psychological manifestations included sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt, disturbed sleep, and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts. Coping strategies centered on emotional and spiritual support, peer sharing, routine adjustment, and seeking assistance from healthcare staff. Formal psychological services, however, were rarely accessed.

Conclusion: Mothers of neonates admitted to intensive care settings experience significant psychological distress, with depressive symptoms being common. Informal coping strategies predominate, while structured psychological interventions remain underutilized. Strengthening integrated mental health support within neonatal care services is urgently needed in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Maternal depression, psychological impact, neonatal intensive care, coping strategies