



Celebrating the World Breastfeeding Week in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Nigeria: Lessons Learned

A. R. Nte^{1*} and G. K. Eke¹

¹*University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, Nigeria.*

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author ARN designed the study. Both authors acquired the data and wrote the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JSRR/2020/v26i930308

Editor(s):

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Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/62068>

Policy Article

Received 29 September 2020

Accepted 29 October 2020

Published 24 November 2020

ABSTRACT

Background: The annual World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) celebration has been a period of massive interaction with stakeholders through various means and sharing of information related to the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding since its inception in 1992. However, with the advent of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent uncertainties about the fate of breastfeeding on one hand, and the imposed measures for COVID-19 infection prevention and control on the other, there was need to modify the traditional way of celebrating the Week to ensure that knowledge about the COVID-19-breastfeeding dyad is communicated to relevant stakeholders while complying with the COVID-19 preventive protocols.

Aims: To share experiences and document lessons learned from the celebration of the 2020 WBW which can be reflected upon and used for improving on strategies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding even amidst the restrictions imposed by the protocols for the prevention and control of COVID-19 infection.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: alice.nte@uniport.edu.ng;

Place of Study: University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH), Nigeria.

Methodology: The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) Committee of the UPTH has celebrated the annual WBW every 1st to 7th August for the past 22 years (1997-2019). The reports of events of previous WBW Celebrations were retrieved and the format of the various activities was compared with that of activities for the 2020 WBW Celebration, which took place in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are presented in tables.

Results: Activities for the celebration of WBW in the pre-COVID-19 era usually included physical meetings for the sensitisation of the hospital communities/stakeholders, radio/television sessions, information sharing in various places of religious activities and a rally to interact with the community people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new strategies for celebration of the WBW were adopted, including among others, virtual meetings, decentralisation of sensitisation of the hospital's clientele and a physical meeting for the sensitisation of the Hospital Management Committee. Positive outcomes of the 2020 Celebration included the management's commitment to the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding, participation in the webinars by stakeholders from within and outside the hospital/Rivers State and establishment of collaborations with several partners. Lesson learned included among others, the celebration of the Week by many stakeholders, the reduced cost of celebration due to the absence of physical meetings and their attendant costs. The personalised invitation of all departments, units and professional associations secured their commitments to breastfeeding. Decentralising the celebration facilitated the adaptation of the messages to the needs of different clienteles and strengthening of members from different departments to promote, protect and support breastfeeding in their work environment. However, the poor participation of the hospital community in the virtual meetings attributable to lack of experience and the cost of participation were setbacks to the targets of the Committee.

Conclusion: The era of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a good opportunity to engage stakeholders from within and outside the hospital for the support of breastfeeding as a safe infant feeding option in the midst of COVID-19 and introduced a new normal, the use of virtual meetings to promote, protect and support breastfeeding in a cost effective manner. The celebration of the Week reiterated the role of breastfeeding for ensuring planetary health which was being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: 2020 World Breastfeeding Week Celebration; COVID-19 pandemic era; University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital; lessons learned.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1992, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) has coordinated the annual celebration of the World Breastfeeding Week (WBW), which provides an important opportunity to inform, anchor, engage and galvanise action on breastfeeding, advocating for its protection, promotion, and support worldwide. It is celebrated from 1st to 7th August, in more than 120 countries [1]. With a theme selected each year to draw attention to different aspects of breastfeeding, that of the year 2020, "Support breastfeeding for a healthier planet" sought to sensitise stakeholders on the role of breastfeeding, which is a living and protective food, in promoting planetary health, emphasizing its sustainability and climate friendliness [1,2].

The University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH) located in southern Nigeria is a multidisciplinary federal government-owned tertiary care facility. The Teaching Hospital's

Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Committee (UPTH-BFHI-C) was established in 1991 to implement activities aimed at making the hospital become Baby friendly, in compliance with the 1990 Innocenti Declaration [3,4]. The Hospital Management, led by the Chief Medical Director, set up the Steering and Implementation Committees headed by the Chief Medical Director (CMD) and a Coordinator respectively to achieve that mandate. The Committees however worked together and have remained one Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Committee with the CMD as the Chairman and a Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator who see to the day-to-day running of the Committee [3]. The membership of the Committee is drawn from the different clinical and non-clinical departments whose services impact on maternal and child health and its activities is guided by its Standard Operating Procedure. The mandate of the Committee is the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding through various activities. These include the celebration of the WBW which it has

done since 1997, using the materials provided by the WABA Action Folder for each year's celebration and adapted by the Hospital's Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) Committee which coordinates the week-long celebration [2-4].

Through its 2020 Action Folder, the WABA proposed activities were under the following headings [2]:

- (1) Provision of Societal support
- (2) Supporting Breastfeeding counselling
- (3) Providing ongoing support across the first 1000 days
- (4) Building knowledge and skills at all levels and
- (5) Leaving no one behind.

The Committee adopted activities to address these areas in its programmes. However, being in Nigeria and cognisant of the choice of the theme for the National Celebration of the Zero Water campaign, the Committee added this theme to its celebration. This follows the decision of the West and Central African leaders in their meeting in November 2019 during which concerns about the low rate of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months were expressed. In recognition of the challenges with attaining the goal of 50% exclusive breastfeeding rate by 2025, which were attributable to many factors including giving children water, semisolids and other foods before the age of 6 months, regional leaders adopted the theme "Stronger with Breast Milk Only (SWBO) - No water until 6 months for a healthier baby" [2,5,6]. This theme was launched in Nigeria during the 2019 WBW with the Nigerian theme as "Start Strong! Zero Water, Exclusive Breastfeeding for better health" and stakeholders at the State level were expected to launch the theme [5].

The 2020 WBW was celebrated in the midst of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which has evolved into an unprecedented global war. This pandemic era has been characterised by disruptions of normal activities in different nations irrespective of the developmental status, and different sectors of their economy, including the health care industry. In the latter, services have been negatively impacted by the restrictions of movement, physical distancing and avoidance of crowd which were recommended as some of the key strategies for the COVID-19 prevention [7,8]. As a novel highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection, evidence-based information on its

transmission through breastmilk/breastfeeding, although limited, suggests the safety of breastfeeding during the pandemic [9,10]. This forms the basis for recommendation of breastfeeding during the pandemic with necessary hygienic precautions as the safest feeding option for infants and young children by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [11]. Moreover, breastfeeding contributes to short- and long- term health, good nutrition, and food security in normal and emergency situations, including emerging global challenges such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Nigeria's 29% exclusive breastfeeding rate for infants aged 0 to 6 months, one of the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa, is being threatened by the impact of COVID-19 on breastfeeding and other health promotional activities [12].

This paper presented the experiences from the celebration of the 2020 WBW in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which were compared with those of previous years' celebrations. Lessons learned therefrom can be reflected upon and used for improving on strategies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding during and beyond the COVID-19 era.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The 2020 WBW celebration was anchored by the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Committee of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, a major tertiary-care, teaching and research health facility in Rivers State, which has a 2020 projected population of about 11 million. With over 800 beds, a clientele of over 400,000 out-patients and over 10,000 in-patients per annum, the BFHI Committee has a large pool of people to reach with strategies for the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding which will further impact not only on the population in Rivers State but well beyond the State.

The Committee writes a detailed report of each of its activities including the WBW Celebrations which have been celebrated every 1st to 7th August for the past 22 years (1997-2019). Thus, the reports of activities for previous WBW Celebrations were retrieved. The formats of the various activities for the celebrations were compared with those of the 2020 WBW Celebration, which took place in the era of Covid-19 pandemic.

3. RESULTS

The results are presented to highlight the activities before, during and after the celebration of the Week.

3.1 Pre-Celebration Activities

Routinely, the Committee holds meetings to plan for each year's WBW celebration. This was also done this year between May and July 2020. The aims of the meetings as was done in previous years were to develop a proposal for the celebration which will be used to request for funds for the activities from the hospital management and other partners and meet with Hospital's Management Committee to solicit for their support and secure funding for the week-long celebration. However, because of the COVID-19 prevention protocols and the need to effectively mobilise the hospital community for the celebration, additional aims were adopted for these meetings. They were:

- Assign roles to Committee members for a smooth running of the programme since the sensitisation of stakeholders will be decentralised to departmental and service delivery points in order to reduce the number of participants and hold the programme during the routine service delivery of each department;
- Mobilise staff in the Crèche, Mother's Room and Nutrition Clinic, which are facilities used for the support of breastfeeding in the hospital. These support units required sensitisation about the breastfeeding in the era of COVID-19 pandemic to ensure they sustain safe practices to prevent infection among their clients while continuing to promote, protect and support breastfeeding;
- Mobilise the hospital community for the celebration through their heads of departments/units, professional and other associations. Since the usual physical meeting with the hospital community to flag off the week-long celebration was not going to hold, the Committee decided to write officially to all departments, units and professional associations in the hospital about the Week and invite the members to the virtual meetings for the celebration. Letters were sent to 35 clinical service departments, 27 non-clinical service units, 6 schools and 5 professional associations

thereby effectively covering the whole hospital community.

Mobilisation of other stakeholders for the celebration: They included the radio and television houses, the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN), the Ministry of Health, the Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, the Primary Health Care Management Board, and the Shell Development Company supported Obio Cottage Hospital. These stakeholders participated in the Committee's celebrations and also celebrated the Week on their own with support provided by the Committee. In addition, some partners supported the Committee's celebrations through sponsorship of various activities in cash and kind. These included the hosting of the breastfeeding programmes on air during the week by Rivers State Television Authority, Nigeria Television Authority, the Africa Independent Television Authority, Nigeria Info, WAZOBIA Radio, Treasure FM and the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation. The MWAN, Rivers State Chapter, hosted the webinars on her platform and supported the printing of some posters. The UNICEF, Rivers Field Office opted to support the hosting of a webinar to sensitise private practitioners, heads of general hospitals and medical officers of health in Rivers State. Additional supports received were the donation of stationeries (Zoric Computers) and refreshments at Committee's meetings (the Kokoon UPTH Guest House, the Green House Food) and posters by the Rotary Club (various chapters were represented, but led by the Rotary Club Uniport-Choba Chapter).

To ensure compliance with the guidelines for the prevention and control of COVID-19 infection, it was agreed that some meetings will be virtual, while physical meetings for the hospital's clientele will be split, and carried out simultaneously in different service points at different departments where mothers and under-five children receive care [7,8]. Thus, members of the BFHI Committee were assigned to support the celebration in various involved departments for the physical meetings. This option was accepted because the COVID-19 pandemic and its prevention strategies had resulted in a drastic reduction of the number of clients visiting the hospital for different services, especially preventive and non-essential health services.

An innovation of hosting webinars through Zoom was adopted for activities where a large

audience was targeted. The links for the meetings were sent to stakeholders prior to the celebration's week. Additionally, the recorded discussions and presentations at the webinars were shared with the participants on the attendance list. These links and materials were sent by WhatsApp and e-mails to stakeholders who were encouraged to share the links with others.

3.2 Celebration Activities

3.2.1 During the Pre-COVID era, programmes of celebrations included

- An opening ceremony during which a lecture was presented on the theme of the celebration to the hospital community, which included all cadres of staff, clients from Antenatal, Family Health and Nutrition Clinics, representatives of the hospital's host community and of various health institutions in the State, partners, medical and other students. Annual reports on the Crèche and Mothers' Room were also presented and recommendations made. A budget was attached to this activity to cover for the hiring of the public address system, generator set, multimedia projector; printing of programme/posters; transportation for the representatives of various media houses and provision for refreshment for all participants. The hall, although usually hired for activities was provided free by the Hospital Management.
- Live and recorded sessions at various radio and television stations.
- Sensitisation talks to enlighten the hospital's clientele, carried out at various clinics in departments of Paediatrics, Obstetrics & Gynaecology (O&G). A budget to cover for refreshment of participants and public address system was attached to this activity.
- Baby shows were held at the Family Health Clinic in Department of Community Medicine of UPTH and at the Primary Health Centre (PHC) Aluu, an outreach facility of the hospital, to recognise babies who had been or were being optimally breastfed and who met other criteria including completing stipulated immunisation schedule for the age of the child. A budget was attached to this activity to cover for refreshment of participants, gifts for the selected babies, hiring of public address system and logistics of moving the Committee members to Aluu

PHC, which is about 4 miles away from the hospital.

- A rally anchored by the BFHI team with medical and nursing students moved to different locations each year, including the hospital and the University of Port Harcourt premises, nearby schools, markets and motor parks. With singing breastfeeding songs and dancing to attract the attention of the public, they interacted with community people, discussed the advantages of breastfeeding/recommendations for optimal infant and young child feeding, and distributed fliers related to the theme of the celebration. A budget was also attached to this activity, to cover the cost of logistics to ensure movement of the rally team, cost of T-shirts for identification and publicity of the celebration and refreshments for the team members.
- Talks on breastfeeding are presented by members of the Committee in their respective places of religious activities during the Week.
- The Committee shared the theme lecture and other materials with stakeholders and advocated to their heads to celebrate the Week.

3.2.2 During the COVID-19 pandemic

The celebrations were held but some of the activities were modified in compliance with the recommendations of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) for prevention and control of COVID-19 infection. Innovations introduced included: A sensitisation meeting for the hospital management/leadership since the usual opening ceremony which they use to attend did not hold; webinar lectures on the theme of the Week Celebration, the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and the Revised Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding; and the decentralisation of sensitisation of the hospital's communities/stakeholders. The webinars provided the opportunity to include other topics in the sensitisation talks unlike during the other celebrations where we were constrained to spend a limited time in order to accommodate questions by the mothers and other stakeholders and allow them return early to receive care at the various service points. However, because students were sent away to reduce their risk of infection during the pandemic, they did not participate in the celebration as many could not be reached during the period

Table 1. Comparison of activities for the WBW celebration, Pre and COVID-19 Eras

Activities for WBW celebration	Pre-COVID-19 era	COVID-19 era
Sensitisation of the hospital leadership on activities of the BFHI Committee	Leadership was invited to attend the opening ceremony which was often attended by a limited number of the Hospital Management Committee. In deed in 2019, none of them attended in spite of their invitation to the meeting	Leadership had a physical sensitisation meeting within the members of the BFHI Committee. Eighteen members of the Hospital Management Committee participated. The UNICEF Nutrition Specialist for the Rivers Field Office attended and facilitated one of the presentations
An opening ceremony	Physical meeting with 250 to 300 participants in a Hall. Participants were drawn from within the hospital and Rivers State. The timing of the event was limited	Webinar meeting with about 70 participants from within and outside the hospital and Rivers State. More topics were covered, including the themes (Promoting breast feeding for a healthier planet, Zero Water, the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative and breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19)
Mass media coverage	Held in various radio and television channels on the theme and other breastfeed in related issues	Held in various radio and television channels on the themes, breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19 and the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes
Talks on the celebration theme at various service points in the hospital	The team of Committee members moved from one service point to another, in various departments. LLINs* were distributed to the mothers in recent years to promote the activities of the Malaria Elimination programme	Assigned Committee members cover Various service points in the involved departments simultaneously. In addition to the themes, Breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19 was discussed. Each Unit had a prototy pe agenda which was used for the celebration. LLINs* were distributed to the mothers as was done in previous years
Baby shows at the UPTH's Family Health Clinic and PHC Aluu	Large numbers of mothers who bring their babies for immunisation attended the events, LLINs* were distributed to them in recent years	Number of mothers in attendance was markedly reduced. No baby show was held but LLINs were distributed to participating mothers
A rally to disseminate breastfeeding messages, and share fliers to the populace	Held in various sites, including Hospital / University premises, nearby schools, markets and motor parks	None was done because of compliance with the COVID-19 prevention protocols
Talks on Breastfeeding in various places of religious activities during the Week	Talks presented by every member of the BFHI Committee	Talks presented by every member of the BFHI Committee in centres that were open for services. But sessions were very brief. Electronic copies of the posters produced for breastfeeding promotion/ banners were shared on various social media plat forms and through e-mails thereby reaching a wider audience
Sharing of theme lecture and other materials with	Soft and hard copies were distributed, physical meetings were held with some Committee members serving	Soft and hard copies were distributed, links to webinars were sent to stakeholders. Softcopies of posters and other support materials were shared with stakeholders to support their

stakeholders, and advocating to their heads to celebrate the week	as resource persons at these Celebrations	celebration of the Week
Sensitisation of the hospital community on matters related to breastfeeding	Done during physical meetings at the opening ceremony and at various clinics.	In addition to the activities of the opening ceremony, an additional webinar was organized to sensitise the hospital community on other issues related to the promotion of breastfeeding. They included the Revised Ten Steps to successful breastfeeding, the Code, the role of Nurses in breastfeeding promotion, etc. About 60 participants were an attendance, Drawn from Rivers State, Lagos, Abuja and other states and included health workers and NAFDAC* officials among others.

*LLIN: Long Lasting Insecticidal Nets;

**NAFDAC: National Agency for Foods and Drugs Administration and Control

Table 2. Outcomes of the various activities of the WBW celebration during the COVID-19 era

Activities	Outcomes
Enlightenment of the hospital leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hospital leadership got a better understanding of their role in upholding the mandate of the BFHI Committee - Promise to establish a Breastfeeding Desk in the Administration Department of the Hospital
Series of lectures via webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants beyond the hospital community were in attendance, as well as some from other States - Participants were more from outside the hospital - The BFHI Committee gained experience with hosting virtual meetings which reduced the cost of meetings significantly
Simultaneous talks to hospital's clientele in the various service points of involved departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of various departments demonstrated commitment and employed innovative techniques for the promotion of breastfeeding among their clients - Clients had a better understanding of the subjects and were actively involved in the interactive sessions as they had a one to one touch with facilitators because of the small group size - Talks were tailored to the clients' needs, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o breastfeeding and dental health was discussed at the Child Dental Clinic o immediate and continued skin-to-skin care after delivery and exclusive breastfeeding with necessary hygienic precautions at the Ante Natal clinic - Caregivers of children on admission were not left out as usual - Formation of departmental teams for the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding
Establishment of linkages and partner ships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Established partnerships which are expected to facilitate the continued promotion, protection, and support of breastfeeding in Rivers State
Cost effectiveness in the methods of the celebration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available funds were used for printing of posters that were distributed to partners in and outside the hospital, and posted in strategic places for hospital's clientele to see and read - Refreshment were not given to participants, rather LLINs were distributed

Table 3. Lessons learned from activities of the WBW celebration during the COVID-19 era

Activities	Lessons learned
Enlightenment of the hospital leadership	- Leadership needed to be updated about breastfeeding especially in the context of COVID-19 and to understand their responsibilities in ensuring the hospital maintains its Baby Friendly status
Series of lectures via webinar	- Lectures were initially directed to members of the hospital community, but a wider reach was achieved, and more topics were discussed - Participation by the hospital community was poor
Simultaneous talks to hospital's clientele in the various service points of involved departments	- More stakeholders were reached with relevant messages about breast feeding as women with or without children attending clinics at various points were reached and given LLINs - The capacity and participation of members of the Committee from different departments was built and resulted in the establishment of department subcommittees for the implementation of breast feeding related activities.
Establishment of linkages and partnerships	- The Committee harnessed the potentials in every person to promote, protect and support its activities and hopes to continue doing this to sustain its impact - Community members were made to recognise themselves as potential partners and stakeholders for breastfeeding promotion, protection and support wherever they are
Cost effectiveness in the methods of the celebration	- Scarce resources were more effectively utilised for the production of posters (IEC* Materials) rather than providing the logistics for the physical meetings such as venue, public address system, snacks, projector, transport, etc - The clientele's need for information was met
A rally to disseminate breastfeeding messages to the community	- An opportunity to reach out and interact with the people at the community level, those who really need the information, was missed. However, with the number of banners produced, posters and the T-shirts which the team members agreed to wear for each meeting till the next celebration, the message of the Week will be reinforced in the community
The expansion of the membership of the Committee	- The Celebration made the Committee recognise the need to involve others in the hospital community in the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding, e.g. the ICT Unit, the Media and Legal Unit which committed themselves to support breastfeeding. The Media Unit helped to increase the visibility of the Committee through the posting of the photographs of the celebration in the hospital's website

* IEC: Information, Education and Communication



Fig. 1. Some Hospital Management Committee members with the resource persons at the Sensitisation of the Hospital Management Committee

and even those who were reached did not have the data to join the meetings. The details of the activities for WBW celebration at pre- and COVID-19 eras are compared in Table 1.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, positive outcomes were recorded, including, among others, renewed partnership with the Hospital leadership who got a clearer picture of the activities of the BFHI Committee, and formation of BFHI team in each of the involved departments. However, the virtual meetings that were targeted at the hospital community, were largely attended by participants from outside the hospital.

The outcomes of the various activities are summarised in Table 2.

Lessons learned from the 2020 WBW are summarised in Table 3.

3.3 Post Celebration

From the lessons learned, the Committee has established implementation subcommittees to sustain breastfeeding promotional activities at departmental levels. At each meeting, a topic is selected, a power point presentation is developed and shared for each member to use in promoting breastfeeding in their units. The little cost incurred by hosting the meeting virtually has empowered the Committee to host more frequent webinars to enlighten the hospital community on selected topics. Additionally, the sensitisation of the private practitioners, secondary and primary care health workers can be held through the webinar with minimal cost implication.

The Committee has continued to function with compliance to the COVID-19 prevention protocols and believes that this new normal will not prevent its activities. The Committee however recognises the need to train and retrain the members of the hospital community for sustained and successful breastfeeding promotion, protection and support.

4. DISCUSSION

Since its identification in Hubei Province China in December 2019, COVID-19 has spread globally, placing an unparalleled burden on the health system and posing major public health challenges worldwide [9]. With limited available data, there is still much to learn and raise awareness about the relationship between this

novel illness and its possible transmission from mother to infant via breastfeeding, the normative standard for infant nutrition [9-11,13]. Celebrating the WBW in the era of COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to acquire and disseminate knowledge related to breastfeeding and introduce innovations while keeping up with the world's new standards of communication and meetings. Thus, to optimise the number of people reached with breastfeeding information, the Committee will continue with the use of online platform for effective dissemination of health information. However, with the high cost of data for internet access, the need to ensure free and reliable internet access to enable all stakeholders participate in online meetings cannot be overemphasised.

4.1 What Went well as the 2020 WBW was Celebrated Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite many uncertainties concerning breastfeeding by a mother who is suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 infection and limited available evidence, the WHO has recognised that the advantages of breastfeeding far outweigh the risks of vertical transmission of the infection [11,14]. Through the WBW, this important information was transmitted to the hospital staff and its clientele, as well as the general public.

Moreover, engaging the hospital leadership, first of its kind in the last 23 years of our hospital celebrating WBW, was an essential stride, consistent with the First Step of the WHO/UNICEF Revised Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding. This is a summarised package of policies and procedures that facilities providing maternity and newborn services should implement to promote, protect and support breastfeeding [15]. The First of the Ten Steps captures critical management procedures, as it has been recognised that leadership involvement is key to sustain implementation of the BFHI in any facility [15].

Complying with the recommendations of social distancing and not having more than 50 persons in any gathering, offered a chance to members of the Committee to engage several small groups of individuals at various service points, considering their peculiarity vis a vis breastfeeding. There was a shift, from passive interaction as obtained previously, where few facilitators addressed large crowd with general talks for everybody, to more

active interactions focused to the clients' needs, which included, among others, early identification of symptoms and essential measures for infection prevention and control of COVID-19 while breastfeeding. Furthermore, the division of labour to ensure all strategic service points were simultaneously covered, produced a better quality outcome, both for the Committee members who were less stressed and for the clients who understood the topics, which was reflected in the types and numbers of questions asked, and promised to pass the information to people around them. An important feat was also achieved: the emergence of departmental sub-committees, which if empowered, have the potential to ensure sustainability of the BFHI in the various departments. Thus, training and retraining becomes imperative, to sustain the gains of the 2020 WBW celebration.

With the introduction of webinar meetings/lecture series, the BFHI Committee interacted with various partners. There were linkages with other members of the breastfeeding community, as well as private practitioners, many of whom had poor awareness of the Revised Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding, the provisions of the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and their responsibilities towards protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding.

4.2 What did not go well as the 2020 WBW was Celebrated Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

It was unfortunate that the webinars which were intended for the hospital community were attended by more non-hospital staff. This could be attributed to the lack of culture, skills and resources of attending and participating in virtual meetings, as well as the unavailability of free internet access for the hospital community. The provision of free internet connection for staff, and training and retraining are recommended to catch up with standards best practice applicable worldwide.

The number of caregivers who brought their babies for care/immunisation, was reduced compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. This could be attributed to the restrictions imposed by the novel disease, as well as families not feeling comfortable with going to the health facilities for fear of contracting the COVID-19 infection, thus many did not access the hospital for their routine and non-emergency health conditions.

With the cancellation of the rally, it was unfortunate that the people of the community were left out of the one-on-one interaction with breastfeeding counsellors. It is however expected that they would have benefited from the numerous radio and television programmes targeted at the grassroots. Thus, continued sensitisation through the various media is recommended for wider dissemination of information.

4.3 Other Learnings as the 2020 WBW was Celebrated Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

The cost effectiveness of the celebration positively impacted on the activities of the BFHI Committee and the community at large, as breastfeeding-related IEC materials were produced and disseminated in the hospital and to partners, who were to post theirs in their various business premises, as a way to ensure continuous sensitisation of the populace.

Linkages and partnership, especially with Community Based Organisations, or partners that operate at the community level, charity organisations (e.g. Rotary Club) provide avenues to reach out to the masses. Some of these partners have committed themselves to the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding.

4.4 Action Steps

The Leadership's promise of creating a Breastfeeding Desk should be followed up to ensure its actualisation as this will provide the link for the continued support for the activities of the BFHI Committee. In addition, the Committee expects to grow into a Centre for Breastfeeding and Infant and Young Child Feeding which will continue to promote, protect, and support breastfeeding.

The need for building strong collaborative systems for the provision of skilled counselling for breastfeeding, which has the potential to extend the duration of breastfeeding and promote exclusive breastfeeding, with benefits for babies, families, and economies, cannot be overemphasised. Since skilled breastfeeding counselling can be provided by different actors, training and retraining of health care professionals, lactation counsellors and peer support providers, in a variety of settings— in health facilities or clinics, or community, with the

establishment of community support groups are highly recommended.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The era of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a good opportunity to engage the hospital leadership in matters affecting the BFHI, and for many staff to join the international trends of webinars, which was cost effective as the limited resources were judiciously used. However, this is not applicable for the common masses who need to be supported to breastfeed their babies optimally. In addition, the Committee was able to reach a wider range of partners and stakeholders whose commitment to support of breastfeeding was revived. Although virtual meetings proved effective in communicating breastfeeding messages, physical meetings will still be required to build the capacity of health workers and caregivers in the skills for the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding. Consequent on the need to comply with COVID-19 prevention protocols, these trainings will be modified to ensure they are cost effective- for example giving the lectures on line to a large number of participants and scheduling the practical sessions for them in small batches.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard guideline participant consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Approval (Ref: UPTH/ADM/90/S.II/VOL.XI/981) was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of various persons and organisations who contributed to the successful celebration of the 2020 World Breastfeeding Week and indeed previous Weeks' celebrations.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
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