

IS THERE A GAP IN PERI-OPERATIVE BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT?

A clinical audit of practice against 2020 guidelines

**Alexander Van Loggerenberg (CT3 Anaesthetics),
Katy Thompson (Midwife)**

Affiliations

East Midlands School of Anaesthesia

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding up to 6 months of age, and continued breastfeeding alongside complementary foods up to two years or beyond¹. Association of Anaesthetists (AoA) guidelines (2020² and 2026³) have provided clear recommendations to replace outdated "Pump and Dump" advice (figure 1).

Objective

The aim of this audit was to assess the quality of relevant information provided to obstetric patients, evaluating compliance with the standard:

'Any women with an infant under two years should routinely be asked if they are breastfeeding during their pre-operative assessment'²

Methodology

- 1 This study employed a single-centre prospective notes review of all obstetric anaesthetic charts in a district general hospital over a one-week period. All obstetric cases both elective and emergent were included; epidural only charts were excluded.
- 2 Charts were reviewed for documentation of the current breastfeeding status, infant feeding plan, and what advice was provided.
- 3 Of 20 Cases recorded, 19 anaesthetic charts were reviewed (one chart was unavailable for review).
- 4 Sequentially, a snapshot survey of consultant, resident and locally employed anaesthetists (n=13) was completed to establish if these audit results reflected routine practice.
- 5 This survey was distributed at a departmental governance meeting via Microsoft Forms, using Likert scale ratings and free text boxes.

ANAESTHESIA AND SEDATION IN BREASTFEEDING WOMEN 2020

Guidelines from the Association of Anaesthetists

- Women should be encouraged to breastfeed as normal following surgery.
- There is no need to express and discard breast milk after anaesthesia.
- Anaesthetic and non-opioid analgesic drugs are transferred to breast milk in only very small amounts.
- Drugs such as opioids and benzodiazepines should be used with caution.
- Codeine should not be used by breastfeeding women.
- During pre-operative assessment, ask women with an infant < 2 years old if they are breastfeeding.
- Local and regional anaesthesia are preferable as they are opioid-sparing and have least interference with infant care.
- Day surgery is preferable to avoid disrupting normal routines. Beware excessive maternal drowsiness, deep sleeping or co-sleeping for first 24 h.
- Make breastfeeding support available for breastfeeding women having surgery.
- Patient information leaflets and additional resources should be available.

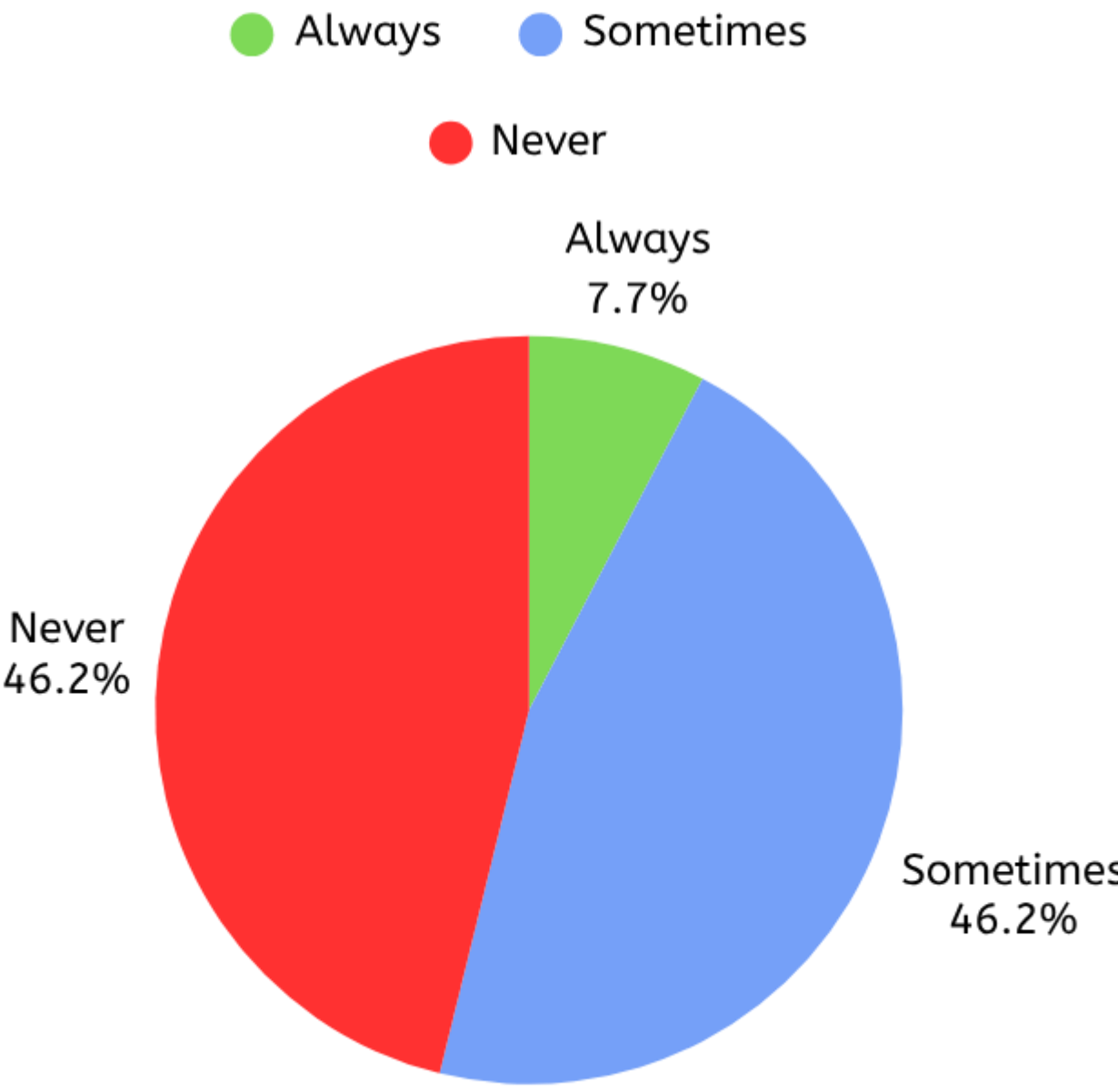
Mitchell J, Jones W, Winkley E, Kinsella S.M. Anaesthesia and sedation in breastfeeding women 2020. Guidelines from the Association of Anaesthetists. *Anaesthesia* 2020; 75.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/anae.15179>
@Anaes_Journal
TheAnaesthesia.Blog



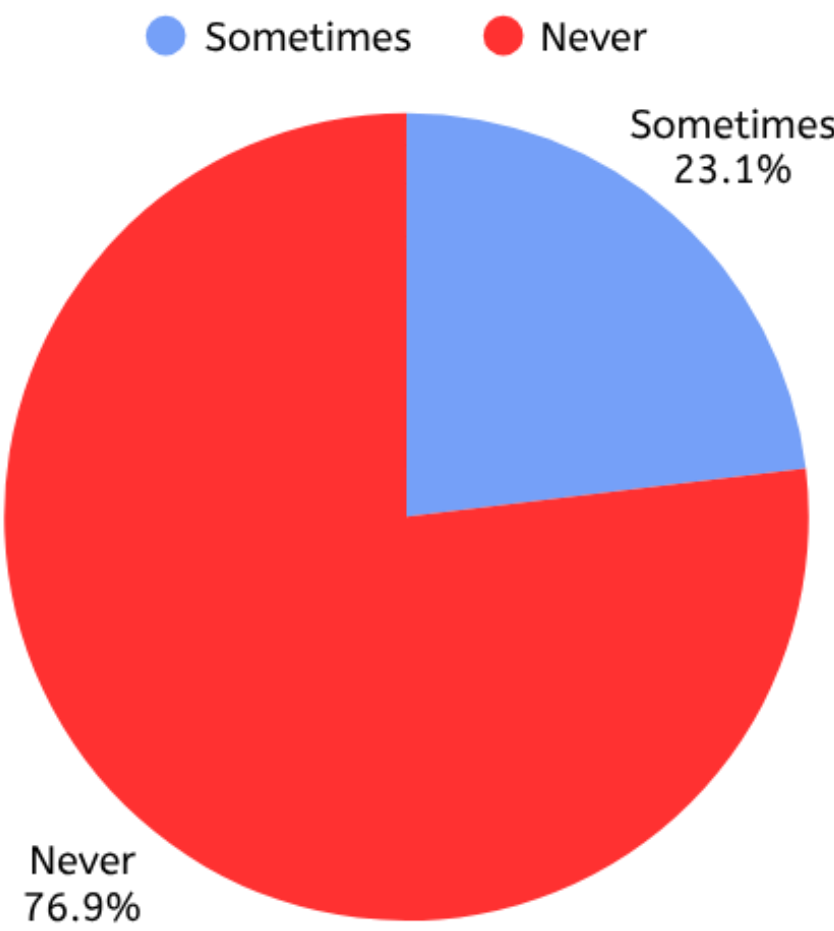
Figure 1

**0/19
anaesthetic charts
documented
breastfeeding
intention**

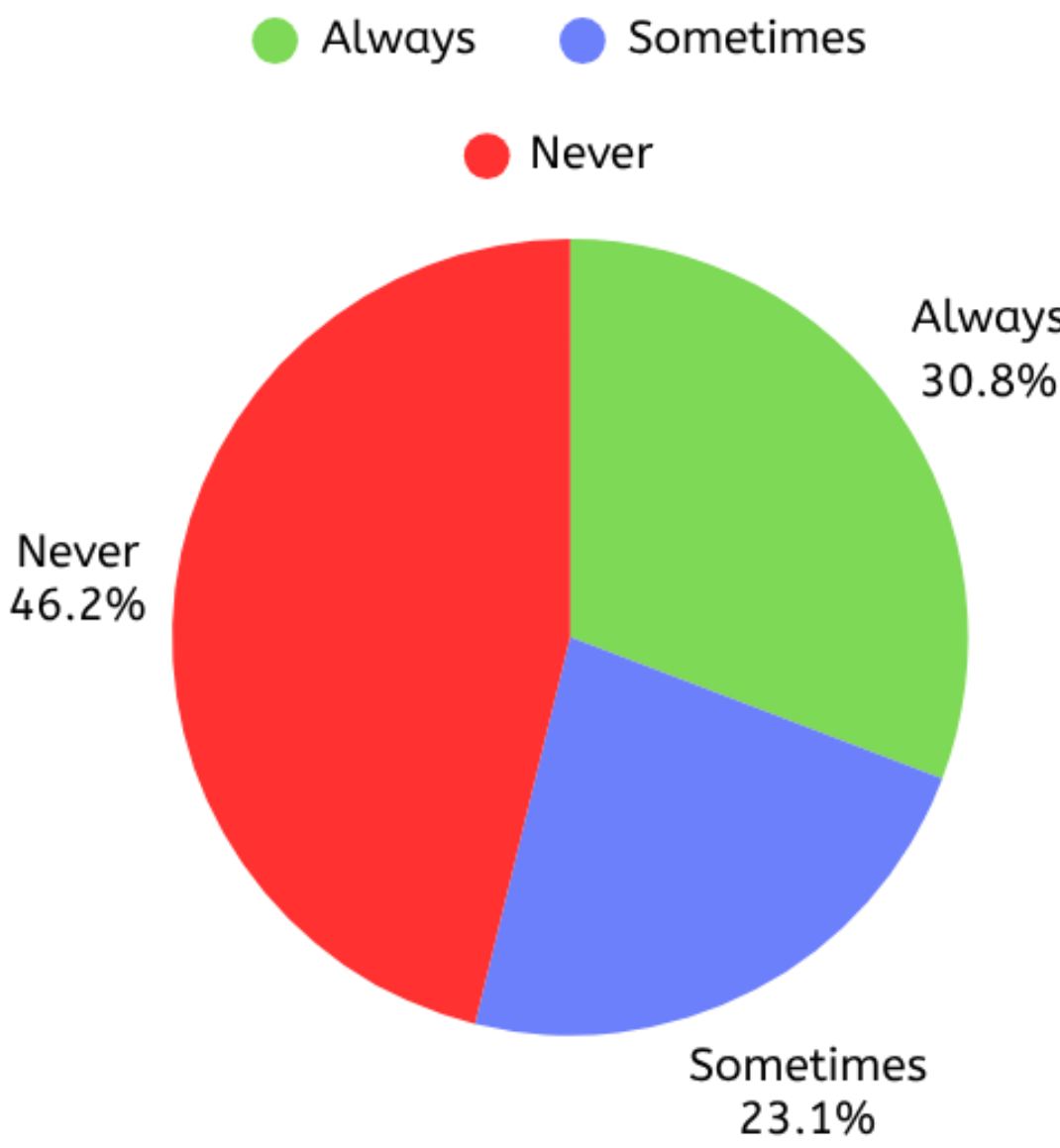
Do you ask female patients if they have children during their pre-operative assessment?



Do you ask female patients about their intention to breastfeed?



Do you ask patients with an infant < 2 years old if they are breastfeeding during their pre-operative assessment?



Results

No anaesthetic charts documented patient breastfeeding status or advice given regarding infant feeding, demonstrating 0% compliance with both the 2020 and the new 2026 guidelines. On survey, only 1/13 (7.7%) of local departmental anaesthetists were familiar with the current AoA guidelines, and 10/13 (77%) stated that they do not ask patients about their intention to breastfeed.

Discussion

Given the exclusive focus on the obstetric department, it is likely that breastfeeding patients attending for other surgery e.g. day case surgery, have been missed. Despite this, the audit revealed a significant area in which preoperative assessment and advice were not compliant with AoA guidelines in this district general hospital, resulting in a failure in the systematic identification and support of breastfeeding patients in the peri-operative period.

Next steps

Three key steps have been taken to address this shortfall of practice compared to the guidelines with plans to repeat the audit in due course.

- 1) Targeted educational intervention to local department
- 2) Re-distribution of patient information leaflets and the generation and distribution of posters based on the 2026 AoA guidelines
- 3) Update to the hospital infant feeding policy - signposting to AoA guidelines



References

1. World Health Organization. The optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding. A systematic review, 2001. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67208/WHO_NHD_01.08.pdf?ua=1 (accessed 29/01/2026)
2. Mitchell J., Jones W., Winkley E. et al. Guideline on anaesthesia and sedation in breastfeeding women 2020. *Anaesthesia* 2020; 75:1482-1493 <https://doi.org/10.1111/anae.15179>
3. Mitchell, J., Jones, W., Morris, S., Cohen, M., Breckenridge, F., Baruah-Young, J., Fletcher, G., Edwards, S., White, M., & Wiles, M. D. (2026). Guidelines for anaesthesia and sedation for patients who are breastfeeding. *Anaesthesia*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ANAE.70128>