

## INFANT FEEDING PRACTICES AMONG ABORIGINALS IN RURAL NEW SOUTH WALES.

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It is reported that mortality and morbidity among Aboriginal infants living in New South Wales is several times higher than that of white infants (Moodie, 1969; Kamien & Cameron, 1974). Growth retardation and low blood levels of nutrients have been reported in substantial numbers of children (Edwards, 1970; Kamien et al, 1974). Little is known about infant feeding practices which may be responsible for undernutrition and the resulting high morbidity and mortality rates.

As part of an assessment of nutritional status of Aboriginal children under five years, interviews were conducted with 146 of the mothers or guardians of a sample of the children. The children's ages ranged from one month to five years with a mean age of 37 months. All of the children except six, lived in rural communities.

Fifty-two percent of the children were breast fed at birth. By three months of age this had dropped to 31 percent and to 16 percent by six months. This incidence of breast feeding at birth is lower than the 77 percent reported in the Sydney area (Allen & Heywood, 1977).

Either as a first feed or upon weaning 56 percent of the children were given a powdered cow milk preparation with added vitamins. A further 15 percent were given a powdered cow milk without added vitamins. Fifty-six percent of the mothers provided vitamin or mineral supplements during the first year of life. Of those, 78 percent chose a multi-vitamin preparation, 20 percent gave Vitamin C tablets, 2 percent iron preparation and 2 percent fluoride. The average duration of vitamin supplementation was 11 months. Fifty percent of infants were given fruit juices from a bottle; 31 percent rose hips syrups and 25 percent cordials. Only 4 percent of infants were reported to take plain water without added sugar. Approximately one third of the children (31 percent) were still using a bottle at the time of interview. Of those, 46 percent were over two years of age and 31 percent were over three years. Solid foods were introduced into the diet before two months of age in 20 percent of the children. Forty-five percent of the children were given cereal as their first food. Twenty-five percent were given commercially prepared custards, gels and puddings.

These results reflect some observations that have been made in Aboriginal Communities; 1) a low incidence of breast feeding, 2) a prolonged dependence on bottle feeding, and 3) a particularly high use of sugar based liquids and foods. The observation of dental caries was high.

It appears that Aboriginal mothers succumb to the appeals of advertising, for example the trend away from breast feeding toward widely advertised infant formulae. There is a great need for Aboriginal mothers to receive acceptable and accurate information on infant feeding.

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