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Health worker perceptions on barriers to provision of kangaroo mother care in Bungoma County, Kenya

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Statement of the Problem: Prematurity-related complications are leading causes of neonatal mortality in Kenya. Approximately 12% of births are preterm and 8% of births are low birth weight (LBW). To improve their survival, WHO recommends the use of kangaroo mother care (KMC), which is endorsed by the Kenya Ministry of Health, but the introduction and scale up of KMC services has been slow. Health worker buy-in and support for KMC is critical to the roll out of KMC services. This study sought to examine health worker perceptions on the factors that would affect KMC implementation in one rural county in Kenya.

Methodology: Three focus group discussions and 10 in-depth interviews were held with service providers and health facility managers from 18 facilities who had been trained on KMC and whose facilities had either started or were in the process of starting KMC service provision. Interviews were transcribed into Word and transferred to NVIVO for an inductive thematic analysis.

Findings: Most of the participants in the FGDs and IDIs could identify benefits of KMC. The main barriers identified were classified into system-related and caregiver-related barriers. The system-related barriers included staff attitude towards KMC and confidence in care of small babies, perceived increase in workload with inadequate staff, lack of infrastructure to support KMC provision and weak involvement of other departments in KMC. The caregiver-related barriers included caregiver commitment, support systems and community perception of KMC and resultant stigma.

Conclusion: Tackling the staff-related barriers to KMC could accelerate the initiation of services in their facilities. Even where space is an issue, motivated staff could support mothers in the provision of intermittent KMC. Emphasis should be placed on proper counselling of mothers on the benefits of KMC and on the need for a strong support system. Community mobilization to tackle stigma must be included as part of KMC programs.

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