

Healthcare Provider Knowledge on Medication Use in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

C.M. McCarthy,¹ S. O'Sullivan,^{2,3} J.C. Donnelly^{1,4}

1. Rotunda Hospital, Parnell Square, Dublin 1.
2. Cork University Maternity Hospital, Wilton, Cork, Ireland.
3. Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Dublin 2.
4. Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Eccles St, Dublin 1.

Dear Dr Murphy,

Historically, there has been a reluctance amongst some healthcare providers to prescribe medications to those who are pregnant or breastfeeding. This continues to influence the clinical care these patients receive, with some disparities and deficits compared to their non-pregnant or non-breastfeeding counterparts.¹ It has been demonstrated that this gap in healthcare provider knowledge should be incorporated into both undergraduate and postgraduate education and training.²

In order to provide education in this area, we created a bespoke study day to provide knowledge to healthcare providers. The first event took place in March 2021, with a second annual event in March 2022. As a component of this, we surveyed participants on their self-reported pre-course knowledge and their views on the topic using pre and post course questionnaires. Completion of the pre-course and post-course questionnaire was not mandatory for participants and there was no financial or other incentive to complete either survey.

In 2021, 323 people registered interest in attending the seminar, with 233 attending live. Nearly two thirds (n=145; 62.2%) completed the pre-course questionnaire, with one in eight completing the post-course equivalent. The majority of attendees were doctors, with attendance also from pharmacists, midwives/nurses and lactation consultants. Nearly two thirds of respondents (61.4%; n=89) identified that they were confident with their knowledge of medications in pregnancy with one quarter being uncertain (n=36; 25.0%) as to their level of confidence. A slightly higher number of respondents (n=33; 22.9%) were not confident with their knowledge with regard to medications in those who are breastfeeding compared to pregnancy (n=19; 13.1%).

Over half of respondents (n=72; 50.1%) reported requiring this knowledge more than a few times per week. Despite this, over four fifths (n=22; 84.7%) of respondents had experienced challenges managing patients in these scenarios.

In the post-course questionnaire, all respondents were satisfied (n=14; 42.4%) or very satisfied (n=19; 57.8%) with the study day with all finding the course relevant to their area of practice and recommending the course to colleagues. Highlights of the study day included the multi-disciplinary nature of the speakers and highlighting the importance that the patient is kept at the centre of the consultation, as well as aspects expanding out from this such as communication.

Going forward, support is needed from the providers of education, the learners and larger government bodies to provide inclusive educational opportunities for learners to engage with this topic. These initiatives could be expanded to be incorporated as an annual mandatory training course, as well as frequent “refresher” training that has been seen with other medication education initiatives.³ In turn, this increase in education could lead to improved support both in primary and secondary care for those in pregnancy, as well as those breastfeeding, and improve breastfeeding rates nationally as per Health Service Executive action plans.⁴

Corresponding Author:

Dr Claire McCarthy
Consultant Obstetrician/Gynaecologist
Rotunda Hospital,
Parnell Square,
Dublin 1.
E-Mail: claire_mccarthy@hotmail.com

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