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BACKGROUND

Evidence-based practice has been encouraged for over a decade in the United Kingdom but the literature suggests that there are 'no magic bullets to ensure that knowledge from research is used in clinical situations. This is not surprising as clinical practice involves interactions between health professionals and clients and the complexity of this is rarely taken into account. There is a dearth of research that has investigated the way that knowledge is used in clinical interactions.

AIMS

To contribute to understanding the way that knowledge is used in practice and the place of research evidence within this, using breastfeeding help and support as a case study. In particular to understand the way that breastfeeding women and health professionals value and use different kinds of evidence.

METHODS

An ethnographic approach was used. A total of 158 interactions were observed between either midwives or health visitors and women who had chosen to breastfeed. Following this, in-depth interviews were carried out with nine midwives, nine health visitors and a sample of 22 women.

RESULTS

Knowledge acquired through direct observation was most highly valued. This included knowledge of what worked to solve particular issues or problems being experienced but also understanding the reasons behind this. Knowledge from research was rarely mentioned in these clinical interactions but this did not mean that such knowledge was not being used. There were many examples of practice that were in line with evidence from research. Women wanted help that was specific and practically useful and they expected health professionals to be able to provide this. Health professionals attempted to provide help that addressed both women's need for information and emotional support.

CONCLUSION

It was not just knowledge that was important but the way such knowledge was used. Knowledge from research found its way into practice in a variety of indirect ways and often provided the general principles that were applied to concrete problems in specific ways.