

Overview of the Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Ireland (Feb 2016)

Babies are important. They give us faith in the future of the world. Babies cannot speak for themselves and their needs are not always to the fore. The international Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative was born 25 years ago to assist in providing a health care environment that supports babies to get the best start in life.

Breastfeeding is recognised as providing a valuable start to a child's healthy life with effects both in the short and long term for both child and mother, as well as health cost savings. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative is a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and UNICEF that started in 1991. This initiative recognises that implementing best practice in the maternity service is crucial to the success of programmes to promote and support breastfeeding.

Ireland is one of the 156 countries around the world with maternity services that meet the global criteria of the WHO/ UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative. Over 20,000 hospitals worldwide and over 400 hospitals in the European Union have received Baby Friendly status.

This initiative came to Ireland in 1998 and maternity hospitals/units in Ireland are at various stages in the process to reach the Baby Friendly award. Approximately 42% of babies are born in the nine Irish hospitals with Baby Friendly designation. This percentage is higher than the USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, Germany, France and many other countries, though lower than UK, Norway, New Zealand, and Netherland rates. In 2014 approximately 40,000 newborn babies were breastfeeding during their hospital stay, giving them a healthy start as well as the health and economic importance for their mothers, families and wider Irish society.

The title was changed in Ireland in 2013 from Hospital to Health to include the broader health service settings that might become part of the Initiative in the future. When the BFHI in Ireland began it was a part of the Health Promoting Hospitals Network programme; it is now an independent organisation with a governance structure and in receipt of grant-aid from the HSE Health Promotion, Health and Wellbeing Division.

Participating in and achieving the Baby-friendly designation is called for in Healthy Ireland, the National Maternity Strategy, HSE Infant Feeding Policy, HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan (and previous strategy), UN Convention on the Rights of the Children report on Ireland, and many other documents. BFHI links with Quality & Safety programmes and participation in the BFHI is proposed by the HSE as a KPI.

In BFHI Ireland there are three levels: Participation (previously Membership), Commitment and National Designation as a Baby-Friendly Hospital. The national designation is for 5 years and annual auditing is required.

Reaching the standard means the maternity unit develops a policy, provides training for staff, promotes informed parental choice through the provision of appropriate and accurate discussions, as well as implementing practices supportive of good mother and baby care. These BFHI standards can take many years of work to achieve. Hospitals go through an extensive assessment by an external team and then are required to keep up these standards through annual audits and regular external assessments.

The babies in the past and in the future have and will go on to be vital members of their community where ever that may be. The good start they receive in a Baby friendly hospital provides our communities with loving parents, skilled workers and innovators, as well as their vital roles as tax payers, consumers and voters! Above all, babies who are cared for learn to care for others thus improving our world.

Visit the web site and find BFHI Link newsletter with research-based practice information, parents' handouts, news and events, sharing from other hospitals, criteria and process information and more.

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