


Using a Wellness Program to Promote a Culture of Breastfeeding in the Workplace: Oregon Health & Science University's Experience

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Abstract

In the United States, many women stop breastfeeding within the first month that they return to work. Working mothers experience challenges in maintaining milk supply and finding the time and space to express breast milk or feed their babies in workplace settings. Changing attitudes and culture within the workplace may be accomplished in conjunction with ensuring compliance with state and federal laws regarding breastfeeding to improve breastfeeding rates after return to work. Employee wellness programs can be 1 avenue to promote breastfeeding and human milk donation as healthy behaviors.

Keywords

breastfeeding, breastfeeding in the workplace, donation of breast milk, employee wellness programs, employers

Background

Oregon, along the northwestern coast of the United States, ranks as 1 of the top states in the nation for breastfeeding initiation, and although our rates are envied by many, we falter in sustaining exclusive breastfeeding.¹ Many women stop breastfeeding within the first month that they return to work.² It is more difficult to maintain milk supply through pumping than with breastfeeding.² Working mothers are challenged to find time to pump, and it is often difficult for mothers to find a private, convenient space to express breast milk while minimizing time away from their work duties. Working full time at 3 months has a negative association with initiation and duration of breastfeeding, whereas mothers working part time tend to have the same rate of successfully meeting their breastfeeding goals as women who are not employed.²

It makes financial sense for employers to support breastfeeding.³ Breastfeeding lowers health care costs as it reduces the rates of the most common infectious childhood illnesses such as otitis media, respiratory tract infections, and gastrointestinal illnesses.^{3,4} Healthier babies mean that breastfeeding mothers are less likely to need to take time off work to care for a sick child.^{3,5} Many US employers contribute to the health care insurance costs of their employees and their employees' dependents.⁴ In addition, employers who support their employees' desire to breastfeed have a higher retention rate of experienced employees.³ This reduces training and

hiring costs. The *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding* advocated for improved workplace support for breastfeeding employees.⁶ Society as a whole benefits from healthier children and mothers. These benefits are the result of reduced health care costs and improved outcomes.⁴

In Oregon, the Expression of Milk in the Workplace law has been in effect since January 1, 2008.⁷ This law requires employers with 25 or more employees to provide breaks for any breastfeeding employee who desires to express milk for her child until the child is 18 months of age. The law recommended that milk expression breaks be taken during the usual scheduled break times when possible. Break time can be unpaid if it extends beyond the usual break times. Employers are also required to make a reasonable effort to provide a private location, other than a bathroom.

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The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was signed into law on March 23, 2010. The portion of the law regarding breastfeeding employees went into effect on that date and amended Section 7 of the Fair Labor Standards Act.⁸ It required employers to provide “reasonable break time for an employee to express breast milk for her nursing child for 1 year after the child’s birth each time such employee has need to express the milk.” Employers with 50 or more employees are subject to this mandate; smaller companies do not have the same compulsory mandate if they can demonstrate that compliance “would impose an undue hardship.” Similar to the Oregon law, federal law states that a bathroom is not a permissible location for milk expression.

A Need for Further Breastfeeding Support

Despite legislation supporting breastfeeding in the workplace, workplace behaviors are heavily influenced by culture. At Oregon Health & Science University Hospital (OHSU), we formed the Workplace Expression of Breast Milk Advisory Committee (WEBMAC), which seeks to help breastfeeding employees to achieve their breastfeeding goals. This volunteer committee has worked to increase the quality and number of available spaces for breastfeeding employees, many of whom perform direct patient care duties. The committee has received feedback and reports from many employees about their difficulties in finding the time for milk expression while caring for patients. It has recognized that changing attitudes and culture within the workplace is important and must be accomplished in conjunction with ensuring compliance with state and federal laws regarding breastfeeding in the workplace.

In our experience, it appears that health care workers are accustomed to prioritizing their patients’ needs first. We have found that many breastfeeding employees need to be encouraged to feel that it is appropriate for them to continue maintaining their milk supply to provide milk for their babies while caring for their patients. The employees are encouraged to request support from their manager to assist them with getting the necessary breaks, encouraging them to see this as an issue of compliance with state and federal laws, which support continued breastfeeding for working mothers. Some employees have reported to WEBMAC negative responses from coworkers about taking breaks. The WEBMAC committee has responded with continued outreach education to managers and employees. WEBMAC also surveyed breastfeeding employees in 2013 and found that employees with more than 1 child reported a great improvement from their previous experience maintaining lactation in the workplace. Communication and continued education with breastfeeding employees, managers, and coworkers will need to continue until the culture of the workplace sees breastfeeding and support of working mothers to provide

breast milk for their children’s needs as the norm. Creative solutions for additional support can assist with this goal.

Using a Wellness Program to Promote Breastfeeding

It is fortunate that OHSU has a robust wellness program supporting and rewarding healthy employee behaviors. HealthySteps is an individual-initiated employee wellness program offered by the benefits department and managed by the Division of Health Promotion and Sports Medicine at OHSU. Its mission is to encourage and reward healthy choices, such as being physically active, maintaining a healthy body weight, attending health-related seminars, community involvement, and donating blood. These activities are logged as “points” by employees and tallied annually. Successful point accumulation and participation in wellness programs lead directly to preferred health insurance rates and even nominal monetary rewards. Given this successful program already in place, we, as members of the WEBMAC committee, approached the staff of the employee wellness program to advocate that breastfeeding and breast milk donation be recognized and promoted as healthy behaviors.

Although the HealthySteps program did not initially include breastfeeding as a recognized healthy behavior, the staff of this wellness program readily agreed to include this and breast milk donation as healthy behaviors. HealthySteps administrators were already aware of the many benefits of supporting breastfeeding in the workplace. A generous donation from the OHSU foundation to the Northwest Mothers Milk Bank (NWMMB; our local nonprofit milk bank) demonstrated our institution’s commitment to breast milk donation, paving the way for milk donation to be added to the HealthySteps options. By recognizing employees who donated extra breast milk, HealthySteps supported the institution’s own goal to support the local milk bank.

Breastfeeding and milk donation began as options for points in January 2013, part way through the benefit year. October 2013 to September 31, 2014 represents the first full year for breastfeeding/breast milk donation options. Working mothers, especially mothers working full time, have difficulty in maintaining their supply for their own babies’ needs.^{2,9} Yet, some employees have remarkably been able to donate to NWMMB, which requests a minimum donation of 100 ounces for the first donation. The HealthySteps website has a link to NWMMB and also to the Human Milk Banking Association of North America site. The Northwest Mothers Milk Bank screens, processes, and distributes this milk for medical need, mostly to area hospitals’ neonatal intensive care units. Employees have reported their delight that their employer would recognize their generous donation. Employees have also reported that they would never have thought of making a donation if they had not read about this option from this site. In an e-mail sent in

May 2014, Lesley Mondeaux, RNC, IBCLC, executive director of NWMMB, wrote,

I wanted you both to know that I talked to a potential (milk) donor mom today that is an OHSU employee. She said she was reading through some of her paperwork from Human Resources and learned about milk donation through the healthy lifestyle program. She said that had it not been for the program she never would have known donating milk was an option! She had never heard of it before. She was in awe of the concept.

She was so excited and truly overjoyed with the idea of her employer recognizing her generosity! Thank you both for your leadership and vision with this project. It is making an important difference.

Current statistics are for points reported from October 1, 2013, to August 29, 2014. In an e-mail sent in August 2014, HealthySteps administrator C. Medina, BS, BA, reported that 152 employees have logged breastfeeding activities, at an average of 12 weeks per employee. A total of 1744 weeks of breastfeeding have been logged over the past 11 months. She also reported that 7 employees logged donating breast milk this year, for a total of 23 donations.

Conclusion

Promoting breastfeeding as a healthy behavior within the workplace benefits all.³ We described the establishment of an employee wellness program to promote breastfeeding. Breastfeeding promotion is especially important within health care institutions, where healthy behaviors should be modeled. We know that women who are supported in their decision to breastfeed their babies will be more productive with reduced absenteeism and are more likely to stay with that employer.³ Our average rate of logged breastfeeding (12 weeks) suggests success with continued breastfeeding after return to work for those choosing to log breastfeeding in the HealthySteps program, an area in which Oregon stands to improve. HealthySteps offers rich future opportunities for investigating the qualitative and quantitative effects of breastfeeding promotion in the workplace via an employee wellness program.

Health care institutions should lead the way in both supporting and promoting breastfeeding as the normal and standard way to feed infants. Employee wellness programs, such

as HealthySteps at OHSU, can be 1 avenue to promote breastfeeding as a healthy behavior.

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