

Increasing acceptability

Knowledge about processes and standards can address lingering concerns

Despite breastmilk's proven health benefits, donated milk has been slow to gain full support in South Africa. Lack of information and lingering doubts about human milk banking appear to be hindering widespread acceptance and use.

Understanding concerns about the use of donated milk and how they can be overcome is critical to further increasing acceptability. Efforts to expand support for milk banking in South Africa would enable wider use of donated milk to reduce infant mortality and morbidity, especially in resource-poor areas.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS ABOUT DONOR MILK?

Long before the advent of formula, babies were breastfed. It was also previously common for women to informally share milk, a lifesaving practice that ensured the survival of newborns whose mothers could not breastfeed.

Attitudes are different today, largely because of fears that HIV can be transmitted through human milk. In a 2009 study in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, on the acceptability of donor breastmilk, respondents said their greatest fear was that infants would contract diseases from donated milk.¹ Women also reported believing that stored breastmilk—even when refrigerated—was unsafe after several hours. Respondents were fearful because they were not aware that milk donors are screened for infectious diseases and have access to cold storage and that the pasteurization process renders breastmilk safe.

ARE CULTURAL ISSUES A FACTOR?

Many people are uncomfortable with the subject of human breastmilk, whether donated or not. In some cultures, there are religious prohibitions against sharing breastmilk or other bodily fluids. Also, some people believe that infants may take on the genetic traits of the milk donor.

The previously mentioned study in KwaZulu-Natal found that hygiene and safety were much more important than

factors related to race and ethnicity in determining acceptability. Seven of eight focus groups said that the donor's race was not a significant issue.

HOW CAN ACCEPTABILITY ISSUES BE OVERCOME?

When women (and their families) become familiar with how donor milk is collected and pasteurized and when they understand the health benefits, they generally support its use, according to research results. Unfortunately, most people, including many health professionals, are currently unaware that pasteurizing the milk makes it safe. A lack of familiarity with the processing of donor breastmilk—including donor screening, pasteurization, and cold storage—is the largest impediment to greater acceptability. This can be readily remedied, however, through education. As we have seen in other countries that have established human milk banks, the more women donate, the more infants will benefit, and the more acceptable the practice will become.



Brazilian National Network of Human Milk Banks

HOW DO ISSUES OF TRUST IN THE HEALTH SYSTEM AFFECT SAFETY CONCERNS?

Even some people who seem knowledgeable about the health benefits of breastmilk and the pasteurization process may question the efficacy of the safety measures in place. In the KwaZulu-Natal study of acceptability, one participant noted that the reason some women may not accept donor milk is that they do not know whether it has been tested, where it has been tested, and how it has been tested. One physician also asked, "Has this cleaning process been absolutely effective?"

Ensuring the effectiveness of screening methods and pasteurization procedures is critical to achieving more widespread acceptability. Lingering distrust of health care policies and standards will require a concerted effort to convince the public that milk banks and donors will comply strictly with all safety precautions. These types of concerns about standards and procedures are not unique to human milk banking, but are part of a larger set of issues relating to trust in the national health care system.

HOW SHOULD EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS BE TARGETED?

Knowledge of the dangers associated with formula feeding and of the lifesaving properties of breastmilk is crucial to deciding whether to accept donor milk. It is imperative that potential recipients fully understand the nutritional and immunological properties of breastmilk, especially in comparison to formula. Milk banks in South Africa have reported that mothers accept donor milk because they know it can improve, and perhaps even save, their infant's life. Research indicates that education campaigns should begin with antenatal care. A nurse in the KwaZulu-Natal survey said it was critical to teach mothers about breastfeeding and donor breastmilk before birth. Education campaigns should extend to family members and the broader community because data indicate that family members have a profound influence on decisions about infant feeding.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS?

Although national and international campaigns have effectively promoted the benefits of breastfeeding over formula, there is an urgent need to promote breastmilk donation and its use. Educational efforts regarding donor milk are most effective when included in broader national campaigns to promote breastfeeding as the



optimal way to feed a baby. A human milk banking campaign of this nature would have far-reaching public health impact but cost little when incorporated into existing breastfeeding promotion efforts.

To ensure widespread acceptability of human milk banking in South Africa, the practice needs to be supported by the country's national and local departments of health, which in turn need to support nurses and doctors working on the ground. Government health professionals are in the best position to strengthen the public's confidence in the safety of breastmilk collection and pasteurization.

Reference

1. Coutsoudis I, Petrites A, Coutsoudis A. Acceptability of donated breastmilk in a resource limited South African setting. *International Breastfeeding Journal*. 2011;6:3. Available at: <http://www.internationalbreastfeedingjournal.com/content/6/1/3>.

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