Breastfeeding

Efforts to Increase Breastfeeding in Arkansas Still Met With Resistance

By Claudia S. Copeland, PhD

When nursing mother Rachel Muller of Jacksonville, Arkansas, heard that her artwork was accepted into Small Works On Paper, a traveling art show sponsored by the Arkansas Arts Council, she was looking forward to showing the accepted photograph, a portrait of her baby breastfeeding. Soon, though, she received news that the first venue, the South Arkansas Arts Center, refused to hang her piece.

She contacted the director, and was told that the reason it was being excluded was that “this is an educational facility located across the street from an elementary school that frequently utilizes our building.” She wrote to the director, informing him that health professionals recommend teaching children about breastfeeding. “By excluding my piece,” she continued, “you are perpetuating the social norms of breastfeeding as something that should be concealed from adults and children. If you display my nursing photo, you will find that children are curious and want to learn about breastfeeding. Please, include my piece in the show.” When her request was again denied, she started a petition, and posted a link to the Arkansas Arts Council Facebook page. For this, she was blocked from the page, a move upheld by the Arts Council executive director. After several dozen signatures on her petition, however, her piece was finally included.

The fact that Muller had to fight to get a portrait of a nursing baby in an art show provides a glimpse into the cultural stigma Arkansas women face for breastfeeding. The view that breastfeeding is somehow something to be hidden from view or done discreetly is not unique to Arkansas. It is, however, unique to our timepoint in history. The irony is that, while mothers in the past had little or no access to academic evidence supporting the benefits of breastfeeding, such evidence is abundantly available now. According to the World Health Organization, if every child was breastfed within an hour of birth, given only breast milk for their first six months of life, and continued breastfeeding up to the age of two years, about 220,000 child lives would be saved every year. Yet, as of July 2013, globally, less than 40% of infants under six months of age are exclusively breastfed.

Breastfeeding is associated with a broad range of benefits for babies, including lowered rates of respiratory tract infections, ear infections, gastrointestinal tract infections, necrotizing enterocolitis, clinical asthma, atopic dermatitis, eczema, inflammatory bowel disease, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, and childhood leukemia and lymphoma. Preterm infants who receive human milk while in the NICU exhibit improved neurodevelopmental outcomes and immune development. In addition, breastfeeding during infancy is significantly associated with positive outcomes later in life, including higher IQ and teacher ratings, and lower rates of childhood, adolescent, and adult obesity. According to meta-analyses cited by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), breastfeeding is associated with a 36% reduced risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), independent of sleep position. The increased rate of SIDS in infants who were never breastfed accounts for 21%
The Arkansas Breastfeeding Coalition, which is co-sponsored by the Arkansas Department of Health and ANGELS (Antenatal and Neonatal Guidelines, Education, and Learning System), is a consultative service of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences for Arkansas physicians. (This year’s conference is tentatively scheduled for August 8, 2014.) Support from organizations like this can make a huge difference in helping nursing women to overcome common, but unexpected, hurdles—like jury duty. When Ms. Muller asked to defer her jury duty to avoid being separated from her baby, who was being exclusively breastfed at the time, it was a position statement from the Arkansas Breastfeeding Coalition that finally convinced the court to grant the deferral. The Coalition “supports providing exemptions for prospective jurors who are breastfeeding to protect babies and small children who are dependent upon their mother for nutrition.” The American Academy of Pediatrics defines breastfeeding as a medical necessity and insists that separating the mother from the child will therefore jeopardize the child’s health. In spite of the efforts of these programs and organizations, in Arkansas the percentage of babies who were ever breastfed is only 36%, compared with a national average of 77%. Breastfeeding at 6 months drops down to 25%, compared with the national average of 49%, and exclusive breastfeeding at three months is 22%, compared with a national average of 48%. The rate of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months, as recommended by the WHO, is a mere 9.2% of the states bordering Arkansas (Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas), only Mississippi has lower breastfeeding rates than Arkansas. While efforts to support nursing mothers will help mothers continue breastfeeding, it is postpartum hospital practices that have more influence on whether mothers start breastfeeding. Arkansas has low rates of “baby-friendly” (providing a breastfeeding relationship practice like skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby after birth, and having the mother and baby room together rather than placing the baby in a nursery. None of the hospitals in Arkansas have yet been designated as “baby-friendly” by the accrediting body Baby-Friendly USA), but several hospitals are implementing strategies to raise breastfeeding rates. “We believe this program will help physicians’ offices around the state to be more supportive of mothers who are breastfeeding, because they will have access to the expertise needed to support them. Physicians’ offices are encouraged to contact us if they would like to be part of this program.” She also points out that the ADH is regularly and actively working to develop new strategies to raise breastfeeding rates. “The Arkansas Department of Health has a dedicated task force that meets monthly to come up with new strategies to raise breastfeeding rates. The task force will establish a pilot program to be implemented in one Arkansas county and will learn how to make an impact on breastfeeding rates.”

**KEY TO PROMOTING BREASTFEEDING IS A GOOD SUPPORT NETWORK FOR NURSING MOTHERS**

Breastfeeding is the Arkansas Breastfeeding Coalition’s top priority. “Breastfeeding is so essential for reducing the risks of disease later in life,” notes Terrie Bell, Breastfeeding Coordinator at Craighead County Health Dept. in Jonesboro. Breastfeeding reduces the risk of osteoporosis, breast cancer, colon cancer, and hypertension. “Breastfeeding also confers significant benefits on the child,” says Muller, “including immediate effects on large reduction in the rate of childhood dental caries.” And the words “Breastfeeding Welcome Here” are also addressing the issue of women not feeling comfortable breastfeeding in public. “Many new moms face typical challenges when they begin breastfeeding: pain, low supply, returning to work, and nursing in public. The coalition provides telephone triage assistance to nursing mothers and their partners to breastfeed correctly. Muller recalls, “I was planning on going [my son] home, I bought bottles, pacifiers. I had never even heard the term ‘exclusively breastfeeding’ until a lactation consultant visited me in recovery after he was born. When I was pregnant, my OB asked if I was breastfeeding. I was confused, I didn’t understand what he meant. ‘Baby friendly’ (promoting a breastfeeding relationship) practices like skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby after birth, and having the mother and baby room together rather than placing the baby in a nursery. None of the hospitals in Arkansas have yet been designated as ‘baby-friendly’ by the accrediting body Baby-Friendly USA, but several hospitals are implementing strategies to raise breastfeeding rates. In addition, Baptist Health offers an outpatient breastfeeding center that mothers can turn to. Expectantly, For You, Expectantly For You, provides a toll-free warmline, hosts a monthly support group, and makes competent appointments with International Board-Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLC).
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Biomedical research overwhelmingly indicates that there is no reason to believe that this level of alcohol consumption is harmful to a breastfed baby, and in fact dark beer is traditionally recommended for breastfeeding mothers to promote milk production. Adams’ attorney, Reggie Koch, believes that the reason for the arrest is pure, negative stigma rather than any real concern about the welfare of the baby. In an argument to drop the charges, he warns of the consequences of such actions: “Efforts to place restrictions on mothers about how and when they may breastfeed—including trying to use criminal statutes to regulate what they eat, what they drink, etc.—has the net effect of “chilling” or discouraging breastfeeding, which is in direct conflict with the stated [by health authorities] goal of encouraging breastfeeding. The message we are sending to breastfeeding mothers with arrests like this one is clear: The authorities are watching you; if you choose to breastfeed your baby, beware! If you engage in any behavior that other people find offensive—morally, religiously, or otherwise—you will be arrested and taken to jail. It is much safer to simply use formula instead of breastfeeding.”

While bottle-feeding may seem safer and more acceptable today, it is actually a very odd practice (albeit a very useful one, when it is necessary). Breastfeeding, in contrast, is a fundamentally normal activity; mothers have been doing it since the dawn of humanity, women’s bodies are optimized for it, and many feel that the experience of breastfeeding is a profound and primordial part of babyhood—a link between emerging from the protection of the womb and entering into relative independence after toddlerhood. In the words of Muller, “I don’t think most people understand that breastfeeding is a relationship. It’s not just about the milk. I didn’t understand that before I had my son.” Certainly, the physical health benefits of breastfeeding are reason enough to support the practice, but if extended breastfeeding is to once again become the norm, the practice will need not only to be allowed, but respected and celebrated as well.

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Clearly, the healthcare establishment in Arkansas is pro-breastfeeding and actively trying to raise breastfeeding rates in the state. This sense of support may be contradicted, though, by a lack of societal support outside healthcare circles. Might the low rates be related to an irrational, but stubborn stigma against breastfeeding? While it is expressly legal to breastfeed a baby in public in Arkansas, the sight of breastfeeding mothers is not common. Muller, who lives about 15 minutes north of Little Rock, rarely sees other mothers nursing in public. “My son is almost three and since he was born I have seen two women (on separate occasions) nursing in public (other than at a La Leche League meeting). One woman was using a cover and the other was nursing in her car. That shows how unacceptable it still is even though I think most people understand that it’s the healthy option.”

Ignorance about breastfeeding can in fact reach shocking levels, with dire consequences, as in the case of Tasha Adams, who was arrested for breastfeeding her baby while eating a dinner that included beer at an Arkansas pizza joint. Over the course of the dinner, she had had two glasses of beer (the amount has been confirmed by her servers and the other people at her table) and was not intoxicated. However, a woman in the restaurant saw Adams drinking beer and breastfeeding at the same meal, and called the police, who then arrested the nursing mother for endangering the welfare of a minor. Her baby, who was being exclusively breastfed at the time, was taken away from her while she was handcuffed and brought to jail. (Luckily, she was able to post bond quickly, as no one else could feed her baby, but after several court dates, the charges were dropped.)

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