Post-discharge Lactation Support for Mothers of Infants Who Discharged from a NICU: Recommendations for Seattle Children’s Hospital’s NICU Guidelines

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HRSA Disclaimer: This project was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), under grant #T72MC00007. University of Washington Pediatric Pulmonary Center/PI: Redding, for total grant amount of $1,718,642. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

Background

Human milk is the preferred food for all infants, yet less than 1 in 2 infants receive exclusive breastmilk for the first three months of life and only 1 in 4 receive exclusive breastmilk for the first six months of life. Most women face challenges related to breastfeeding. However, mothers of NICU graduates face additional barriers related to factors such as prolonged pumping and their infants’ physiological immaturity. While the provision of post-discharge lactation support has increased nationally, it still fails to meet the expressed needs of this population.

Research Aims

Seattle Children’s Hospital’s does not currently offer post-discharge lactation support services to women whose infants discharge from its Level IV NICU.

1. Does the need in Washington State suggest that Seattle Children’s Hospital should offer post-discharge lactation support services to this population?

2. If so, what should this support look like?

Methods

- Conduct a Literature Review to assess what published guidelines exist for effective, post-discharge lactation support services
- Issue survey to the WA State Nutrition Network & Community Feeding Teams to evaluate the needs and opportunities in WA State (#1)
- Issue survey to RDNs at other U.S. Level IV NICUs to assess practices in other hospitals (#2)

Literature Review Findings

Recommendations and guidelines on post-discharge lactation support services have been published by:
- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General
- World Health Organization & United Nations Children’s Fund
- Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine
- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force

Characteristics of general, evidence-based recommendations include the importance of:

1. Providing families with anticipatory guidance for transitioning to breastfeeding at home and with individualized feeding plans that meet the specific needs of their infant
2. Fostering collaboration between the hospital and providers in the local community
3. Including lactation consultants as central providers in delivering timely and on-going support

Specific recommendations for the timing and duration of support include:

1. Providing follow-up within 2-3 days of discharge
2. Providing on-going support until breastfeeding is established and the infant is consistently gaining appropriate weight

Survey #1 Findings (n = 39)

- 86% of respondents expressed their communities had a high need for post-discharge lactation support services (level 3-5)
- 40% identified the availability of services was low (level 0-2)

Survey #2 Findings (n = 7)

- 57% of respondents reported their Level IV NICUs were not providing these services
- 100% of respondents believed mothers were in need of services and not utilizing them
- Respondents reported similar barriers to accessing services: lack of awareness of community support, lack of family transportation
- Respondents thought the hardest to reach populations were those in rural areas and lower SES families
- For those who were not offering services, rationale included lack of staffing and reimbursement
- One respondent noted that increasing access to services might improve families’ motivation & commitment to breastfeeding

Recommendations

1. Families should receive individualized, discharge feeding plans & specialized, anticipatory guidance
2. SCH should coordinate follow-up care, and an SCH lactation consultant should follow-up via phone within 2-3 days following discharge. Lactation support should be on-going until breastfeeding is established & baby is gaining appropriate weight
3. Families need practical skills & problem-solving skills, as well as access to resources like nursing bras and breast pumps
4. Alternative platforms, like telelactation, are needed to increase the reach of support in harder to reach areas and/or populations
5. SCH is well-positioned to provide specialized training to community providers in lactation support needed by families with NICU graduates