



American Academy of Nursing on Policy

Core competencies in human milk and breastfeeding: Policy and practice implications for nurses

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The American Academy of Nursing endorses human milk and breastfeeding as the preferred method of infant feeding and has a long history of policy work and publications from the Expert Panel on Breastfeeding of the Academy. The Academy has members who serve the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC), and our members actively participated in the development of the core competencies for health professionals. In 2013, the Academy endorsed these core competencies for health professionals, further underscoring our commitment to improving the landscape of breastfeeding in the United States.

The American Academy of Pediatrics Position Statement clearly articulates that breastfeeding and the use of human milk are a public health issue, not a lifestyle choice (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012). Their recommendations are that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months and that breastfeeding should continue for 1 to 2 years or more as mutually desirable by the mother/child dyad (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012; World Health Organization, 2002). Although 76.5% of women currently initiate breastfeeding (including those who put the infant to the breast just one time), only 16.4% of infants are exclusively breastfed at 6 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013a). To achieve optimal health outcomes for children and their mothers, significant efforts must be made to improve the exclusivity and duration of breastfeeding.

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding details specific actions needed to improve breastfeeding outcomes and the health of our nation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Action items 9 and 10 address the specific need for health professional education about human lactation and breastfeeding to ensure that all women and families receive evidence-based lactation care, education, and support (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Action item 9 notes that all health professionals should be provided with education and training in order to provide evidence-based lactation support and care, and

action item 10 explicitly states that all nurses and midwives should provide basic breastfeeding support as a standard of care.

In 2007, the American Academy of Nursing's Expert Panel on Breastfeeding published an article advocating that breastfeeding education be integrated with all courses in baccalaureate nursing curricula (Spatz & Pugh, 2007). However, expert panel members report that breastfeeding content remains minimally covered in most schools of nursing. An exception is the program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing where an undergraduate seminar course provides 28 hours of didactic and 14 hours of clinical experience/role observation regarding human milk and breastfeeding (Spatz, 2005). This course was featured as an exemplary program/model in "Strategy 2: Professional Education" in the Centers for Disease Control's recently released *Strategies to Support Breastfeeding Mothers and Babies* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013b).

The USBC also has addressed the need for increased health professional education through their development of core competencies as outlined in *Core Competencies in Breastfeeding Care and Services for All Health Professionals* (USBC, n.d.). The USBC core competencies address three specific categories of breastfeeding education, support, and care: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Table 1 provides a brief summary of their recommendations. The full document is available from the USBC website (USBC, n.d.). The USBC recommendations state that all health professionals must possess a minimum level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support and protect breastfeeding, including, at a minimum, understanding that human milk/breastfeeding is the optimal feeding method for infants and young children (USBC, n.d.). They also assert that it is essential for practitioners to provide realistic expectations for families and culturally competent breastfeeding care and services (USBC, n.d.).

The USBC calls for organizations such as the Academy to prioritize breastfeeding as a critical public health issue (USBC, 2011). The American Academy of

Dr. Spatz represents the Academy on the United States Breastfeeding Committee. This report describes work of the Committee with relevance to Academy fellows.

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Table 1 – USBC Core Competencies in Breastfeeding Care and Services for All Health Professionals

Knowledge
<p>All health professionals should understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic anatomy and physiology of lactation • How human milk prevents disease and illness • Why exclusive breastfeeding matters • How pregnancy and birth practices influence breastfeeding • Societal and cultural factors influencing breastfeeding • Risks of formula feeding • Contraindications to breastfeeding • When and how to refer for lactation services • Resources for families • Role of formula company marketing
Skills
<p>All health professionals should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect, promote, and support breastfeeding in their practice • Complete a lactation health history and be aware of factors that could influence breastfeeding • Refer and seek assistance from lactation professionals • Protect confidentiality • Use new technologies to ensure evidence-based practice
Attitudes
<p>All health professionals should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value human milk/breastfeeding as a public health issue • Recognize and respect cultural differences related to breastfeeding care and support • Respect confidentiality • Remain free of the influence of formula company marketing • Seek collaboration with interdisciplinary lactation care teams • Encourage employers to develop employee lactation programs • Be aware of personal values that could bias care • Support colleagues who are breastfeeding • Support family-centered policies at the local, state, and federal levels

Nursing already has endorsed the USBC core competencies. Now it is time to take action.

The Academy Call to Action is for (at a minimum) the adoption and implementation of the USBC's core competencies. These breastfeeding services and care competencies were developed to ensure that health professionals have a framework and guidelines for integrating evidence-based breastfeeding knowledge, skills, and attitudes into daily practices (USBC, 2011). Educators are uniquely suited to lead the way by incorporating these core competencies into undergrad-

uate and graduate nursing education curricula (USBC, 2011). Nurses already in clinical practice also need opportunities for education to ensure that they can provide evidence-based lactation support and care. Thus, the Academy urges everyone to incorporate these competencies both in academia and clinical practice. After all, educated nurses are the first level of intervention for all breastfeeding women and their infants.

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