

Professional Education

Definition

Professional education includes any programs that improve the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviors of health care providers on the importance of breastfeeding, the physiology and management of lactation, or counseling related to breastfeeding. Health care providers are defined here as physicians, nurse-midwives, nurse practitioners and other nurses, nutritionists, lactation consultants, and other members of the health care team such as pharmacists, social workers, speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists.



Rationale

Health care providers have a substantial influence on a woman's decision to breastfeed and on her ability and desire to continue breastfeeding.⁶⁰ Even so, some clinicians lack the skills to manage problems with breastfeeding.^{61,62} Moreover, some believe that breastfeeding provides only modest benefits and that infant formula is not a significantly inferior choice. Education to improve the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of health care providers could be a key strategy for improving breastfeeding rates.

Evidence of Effectiveness

While professional education may be a prerequisite for the success of other breastfeeding interventions (e.g., lactation support services, maternity care practices), a **Cochrane review**³ found no evidence that professional education alone directly improves rates of breastfeeding initiation or duration. Intensive initial courses (as well as in-service trainings) in lactation can be effective in increasing the knowledge of health professionals and thereby be an important component of more comprehensive programs to promote breastfeeding.

Description and Characteristics

Educational programs on breastfeeding range from 1-hour lectures to intensive courses lasting 3 months. Building the skills to enable health care providers to deal with even routine lactation problems takes a combination of extensive formal instruction and practical experience. While short





lectures are to be encouraged for the purpose of raising general awareness and increasing acceptance of the importance of breastfeeding and lactation management, expecting clinicians to obtain the needed skills in brief, one-time lectures or events is unreasonable.

All health care providers who interact with women of reproductive age or with children need a basic understanding of breastfeeding. In addition, they need to understand how the procedures they perform or the drugs they prescribe could directly or indirectly affect women who breastfeed currently or who may do so in the future. Professionals need to recognize that breastfeeding is a normal and biologically important physiologic process that is critical to infant and maternal health. Professionals working in maternity care (obstetrics, midwifery, pediatrics, family practice) need in-depth knowledge and skills directly related to breastfeeding and lactation management. In addition, a cadre of highly skilled lactation professionals is needed to deal with complicated lactation problems.

Ideally, education on breastfeeding needs to be built into the curricula of medical and nursing schools and educational programs for other health professionals, as well as into the residency and fellowship training of physicians. Additionally, because many of today's health professionals did not receive adequate training in breastfeeding, in-service training or retraining for current practitioners is needed.

Program Examples

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Breastfeeding Promotion in Physicians' Office Practices (**BPPOP III**) program educates and supports residents in pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and family medicine; practicing physicians; and other health care professionals and public health representatives in the effective promotion and management of breastfeeding in racially and ethnically diverse populations pursuant to the achievement of national goals for breastfeeding in *Healthy People 2010*.¹ An adaptable curriculum that can be integrated into medical schools and residency programs is being developed to optimally train future physicians about breastfeeding. Participation in BPPOP III strengthens and expands the number of national organizations—including nurses' associations and organizations of allied health professionals and laypersons interested in breastfeeding—that are collaborating to increase the incidence and duration of breastfeeding and decrease racial and ethnic disparities in breastfeeding rates. Also through the program, information is provided about structured educational programs that have been found effective, behavioral counseling

techniques, and ongoing support of women to initiate and sustain breastfeeding. Technical assistance is provided by AAP and other experts. BPPOP III is operated by AAP in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Resource materials and further information are available through the AAP Web site (<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/bf/brpromo.htm>).

La Leche League International sponsors an Annual Seminar for Physicians on Breastfeeding to educate physicians and other lactation specialists. AAP and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists are cosponsors, and the American Academy of Family Physicians participates as a cooperating organization. The seminar covers new and ongoing breastfeeding research, optimal clinical management, legal and ethical aspects of promotion and support, current literature and how to critically review it, and the development of physical and psychosocial support skills.

Wellstart International has developed, with federal support, a *Curriculum Guide for Faculty of Medical, Nursing, and Nutritional Programs* as well as a *Lactation Management Self-Study* tool for use in preservice and in-service programs as well as in continuing education. Wellstart International also provides consultation for curriculum integration planning.



The Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine has published evidence-based clinical protocols for managing common medical problems that may affect breastfeeding. Currently, protocols are available addressing hypoglycemia (in English, Spanish, and German); hospital discharge, **mastitis**, and management of **peripartum**

breastfeeding (all in English and Spanish); **cosleeping** and breastfeeding; model hospital policy; storing human milk for home use; **galactogogues** (medications used to promote milk production); breastfeeding the near-term infant; **neonatal ankyloglossia** (condition in which movement of the newborn's tongue is restricted by a tight lingual frenulum); and transitioning from the **neonatal** intensive care unit (NICU) to home.

Education for health care providers on breastfeeding is needed in at least three areas:

- *Importance of breastfeeding.* In the United States, knowledge of the benefits of breastfeeding is generally high,⁶¹ but some health professionals believe these benefits are not substantial and that infant formula is not significantly inferior to breastfeeding. Furthermore, they are generally unclear on how long breastfeeding should continue or the importance of exclusive breastfeeding.
- *Lactation management.* Taveras et al.⁴⁸ found that women whose physicians recommended supplementing breastfeeding with formula or who did not consider their advice to mothers on breastfeeding duration to be very important were more likely to have discontinued exclusive breastfeeding by 12 weeks **postpartum**.
- *Counseling.* Health care providers need skills in talking with pregnant women and mothers about breastfeeding and how to incorporate breastfeeding into their lives.

The International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA) provides a guide to selecting a lactation course as well as a Directory of Lactation Course Providers that lists persons available to assist hospitals and other organizations with on-site education in lactation. ILCA's Worldwide Education Calendar lists specific lactation courses around the world.



The Mississippi Department of Health WIC program has developed a three-level training program, *How to Support a Breastfeeding Mother*, which has been adapted for use with health professionals who provide education and support to new mothers. Level 1 is designed to increase awareness of the importance of breastfeeding among all staff. Levels 2 and 3 address preventing and managing breastfeeding problems as well as maintaining breastfeeding in the midst of special situations.

Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) Breastfeeding Promotion in Physicians' Office Practices (BPPOP III):
<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/bf/brpromo.htm>

La Leche League International's Annual Seminar for Physicians on Breastfeeding:
<http://www.la lecheleague.org/ed/PhysSem.html>

Wellstart International:
<http://www.wellstart.org>

Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine:
<http://www.bfmed.org>

International Lactation Consultant Association Course Listings:
<http://www.ilca.org/education/courselistings.php>

Mississippi State Department of Health WIC Program:
<http://www.ms dh.state.ms.us>

Potential Action Steps

- Distribute clinical protocols developed by the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine to local physicians.
- Host a lactation course or send health professionals to such a course.
- Provide training to health professionals using the Mississippi WIC curriculum.
- Collaborate with medical school faculty to improve the quality and increase the quantity of course content devoted to breastfeeding education management.
- Make available and coordinate grand rounds or in-service presentations on breastfeeding by IBCLCs or other professionals with specific training in breastfeeding.