Reducing Infant Mortality through a Comprehensive Breastfeeding and Human Milk Donation Program: Learning from Brazil

It is widely accepted that human milk provides optimal nutrition for infants in the first year of life, and that lack of proper nutrition has a direct effect on infant mortality. Despite the proven benefits of human milk, many mothers are unable to provide their own breast milk to their infant. In the absence of a mother’s own milk, pasteurized donated human milk from a regulated milk bank is a safe and beneficial alternative and may be superior to commercial formula. Currently, access to pasteurized donated human milk is limited in the US, costs of processing it are high, and the supply is inadequate to meet the needs of all infants who could benefit.

Through the efforts of the Brazil Initiative housed within the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS), the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), and Global REACH, the University of Michigan (UM) has joined with Brazil to learn more about its methods regarding human milk donation. As the first North American medical school to engage collaboratively with the network, UM pediatrician, Dr. Lisa Hammer, MD, IBCLC, and neonatologist, Kate Stanley, MD, have teamed up with Dr. João Aprígio Guerra De Almeida, director of the Brazilian Milk Bank Network, and Dr. Danielle Aparecida da Silva to develop collaborative education and research initiatives about human milk.

Brazil is internationally known for its well-organized, cost-effective, regulated network of more than 200 human milk banks (compared to 14 in the US) and its wide social acceptance of breastfeeding and donor human milk practices. The Brazilian Milk Bank Network was established in the late 1980s, and is overseen by the National Human Milk Bank Committee and a reference milk bank based at FIOCRUZ in Rio de Janeiro. The reference bank ensures the quality of donated human milk and compliance with national guidelines regarding human milk banking. It provides education and training for employees of milk banks, conducts research on donated human milk and quality control methodology, disseminates information about milk banks, and collaborates with the national government to design public health policies. Researchers believe this campaign has contributed to reductions in Brazil’s infant mortality rate over the past two decades.

With support from the Brazil Initiative at LACS, a multidisciplinary delegation of UM physicians, nurses, nutritionists, lactation consultants, and public health students traveled to Rio de Janeiro in August 2014 to work directly with the Brazilian collaborators to gain valuable hands-on experience and to develop international projects focusing on breastfeeding, human milk, and infant nutrition. This partnership will help guide UM’s CS Mott Children’s Hospital as it works toward the development of an on-site human milk bank.