

Breastfeeding Education for Medical Students

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Introduction

Over twenty-five years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) together called for all healthcare providers to be trained in the skills necessary to support breastfeeding. Although breastfeeding is currently recommended as the optimal method of infant feeding by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, many medical students in the United States do not feel comfortable offering lactation guidance to mothers. Physicians-in-training usually learn that most mothers should breastfeed, but they are rarely offered the tools to help their patients succeed in what can be an overwhelming and stigmatized undertaking. There are common challenges associated with breastfeeding and healthcare clinicians, from medical students to attending physicians, if properly trained, could provide guidance and information to mothers who might need help. This project aims to educate and equip medical students with strategies to care for their breastfeeding patients.

Methods

In Spring 2016, medical students at Warren Alpert Medical School (AMS) were invited to participate in an online survey assessing their knowledge about and comfort with breastfeeding. Participants answered 7 multiple-choice questions that tested their knowledge covering topics in "Lactation Anatomy & Physiology," "Maternal and Infant Nutrition," "Lactation Technique and Latch," "Common Breastfeeding Problems," and "Risks and Benefits of Breastfeeding," and additional 5 questions to gauge their personal comfort with offering breastfeeding

advice covering the categories listed above. Four optional demographic questions were included in the survey: year of medical training; gender; anticipated specialty; and experience with breastfeeding. Participants were asked an optional open-ended question, "Is there anything else you would like to learn about breastfeeding or lactation counseling while in medical school?"

Results

In total, 65 students participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 22%. Most participants were female (68.8%) and in their first year of medical school (57.8%). Of the students who completed the survey, 93.8% did not have personal experience with breastfeeding. Answers to the knowledge-based questions indicated that medical students were best equipped to answer questions related to anatomy and physiology (69% correct). Students were much less likely to answer questions correctly in the four other categories. Of the respondents, 2 students answered all seven multiple-choice questions correctly. Results from the self-comfort assessment showed an overwhelming majority of surveyed students reported feeling "not comfortable" in offering assistance in all of the categories of breastfeeding. Students felt least comfortable offering aid related to "infant and maternal nutrition" (83% felt "not comfortable") and "position and latch" advice (81% "not comfortable").

Conclusion

A total of 65 medical students at AMS participated in a survey to determine their baseline knowledge of, and comfort with, lactation assistance. A majority of respondents expressed discomfort with addressing basic lactation topics and techniques. Students were also unable to answer most multiple-choice questions about breastfeeding correctly. Using the survey data to emphasize topics with the biggest knowledge and comfort gaps, an online course for medical students at AMS was designed. While the research, manuscript, and layout for the online course are complete, media content (including some videos, graphics, charts, and animations) is still under production. The online course is expected to take

students approximately 3 hours to complete and will be an optional part of the curriculum for students beginning in the 2017-2018 school year. Students who participate in the online course will gain exposure to the clinical aspects of lactation and therefore the hope is they will be better equipped to approach these topics with their patients.