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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

It's the oldest childcare practice known to humanity, but in the modern era, breastfeeding has gone in and out of vogue as women's lives changed. Many mothers aren't sure how to nurse their newborn babies or even who to ask for advice. What was once a simple, almost instinctive act, has become complicated and confusing.

Robyn Allaman can sympathize. When the nurse manager for the Southwest Medical Center obstetrics department began a search for ways to support breastfeeding, she found programs that made the situation worse.

"Some of them weren't user-friendly," she said. "The first one I read about? It had 10 topics or goals to achieve, and it kind of presented the issue as if breastfeeding was the only way."

Allaman kept looking until she found the best fit for Liberal's diverse and growing population: High 5 for Mom and Baby, a program supported by the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund in

Hutchinson.

The program focuses on helping hospitals support breastfeeding through the implementation of five "best practices" designed to support breastfeeding. These range from actions taken immediately after the birth of a baby — making sure the mother and infant have skin-to-skin contact — to follow-up and support when new families are dismissed.

After nearly a year of effort, SWMC will be recognized Friday by the High 5 program for implementing the basic steps. High 5 for Mom and Baby presentations are scheduled from 7:30-9:30 a.m., and again from 1-3 p.m. at the hospital. Each session is open to the public; representatives from the Liberal Breastfeeding Coalition have already planned to attend.

Allaman credited the local chapter of La Leche League, the Liberal Area Coalition for Families, health care professionals and the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program administered by the Seward County Health Department, for building support in the community.

"We meet every other month and talk about what we can do to make breastfeeding more culturally acceptable in our community," Allaman said. Already, the group has made progress, sponsoring a breastfeeding and baby care booth at the Seward County Fair in August 2013, and approaching employers about ways to support breastfeeding mothers who are employees.

Even as the program grows, Allaman is careful to note that the goal is to offer women support, if they choose to breastfeed — not bully them into nursing their babies.

"I do think it's a woman's body, and it's her choice whether or not to breastfeed," Allaman said. "It isn't the right thing for everyone."

However, she noted, many women dismiss the possibility because they lack information about the benefits for their children.

"I've heard young mothers say, 'I can't breastfeed because I eat a lot of junk food and my milk won't be any good,'" she said. "Of course, if a woman is smoking or drinking or using other substances, that can be detrimental to the baby's health. But you don't have to be a good cook, eating everything at home, to breastfeed. Even breastfeeding a newborn baby for the first few weeks gives that child a huge advantage in the long run."

Studies show that children who are breastfed are less likely to struggle with obesity, develop diabetes or food allergies, or even heart disease or cancer. They also tend to have stronger immune systems throughout their lives.

Allaman is especially sympathetic to mothers who fully understand the benefit of breastfeeding, but struggle to make it happen because of work obligations.

"If you're doing shift work and you can't get away to pump milk, that's a problem," she said. "Sometimes, it's economic. Mothers can't afford a good quality breast milk pump. There are many issues, and you can't understand what it's like for a new mother until you've stood in her shoes."

Southwest Medical Center offers a helping hand through the free "rental" of high-quality breast milk pumps, available for check-out to new mothers.

Allaman said she knew SWMC and the breastfeeding coalition was on the right track when she worked with a young mother over the holiday break.

"She is a teacher, and she was almost tearful when I told her she could 'check out' a breast pump," Allaman said. "It's a dual, quick, efficient model, and she was so thankful." Because of the pump, that mother and child will be able to continue breastfeeding, even when she returns to work.

As far as Allaman is concerned, that story alone is worth a high five.

The “High 5” Practices for Kansas Hospitals

- Assure immediate and sustained skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby after birth.

- Give newborn infants no food or drink other than breast milk, unless medically indicated.

- Practice “rooming in,” which allows mothers and infants to remain together 24 hours a day.

- Give no pacifiers or artificial nipples to breastfeeding infants.

- Provide mothers options for breastfeeding support in the community upon discharge.

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