Breastfeeding Support in a Community Pharmacy: Improving Access through the Well Babies at Walgreens Program

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Abstract

Well Babies at Walgreens is a unique community-based corporate partnership program that offers breastfeeding support by a lactation professional in a private room at the pharmacy. Walgreens is a community pharmacy chain with more than 8000 locations in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. The primary goal of Well Babies is to support breastfeeding women using a model that is expandable to other Walgreens pharmacy sites. The Well Babies program offers drop-in services, with a professional consultation by a lactation consultant and baby weight check, if desired. Well Babies creators are developing a business plan for Walgreens and a toolkit that would help other stores implement the program. An additional goal is to improve continuity of care for breastfeeding by engaging pharmacists as vital members of the health care team. Offering breastfeeding support at a pharmacy improves access and encourages support persons to attend while simultaneously allowing the family to complete other errands. This initiative included education for pharmacists to improve the recommendations they make for breastfeeding mothers and to improve awareness among pharmacists of the benefits associated with breastfeeding and the need to preserve the breastfeeding relationship. The first drop-in location opened in April 2012. Grant funding from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, awarded to the Indiana State Department of Health, made it possible to open a second drop-in location in June 2013. Future plans include developing an employee lactation program and expanding Well Babies at Walgreens at other store locations.

Keywords

breastfeeding, breastfeeding support, pharmacist, pharmacy

Background

Although 79.2% of mothers in the United States initiated breastfeeding in 2011, less than half (49.4%) were still breastfeeding at 6 months; only 18.8% met the American Academy of Pediatrics’ goal of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months.¹ ² Breastfeeding rates in the state of Indiana, where Well Babies was developed, are lower than the national average. Although 74.1% of Indiana mothers initiated breastfeeding in 2011, only 38.6% were still breastfeeding at 6 months and 18.1% were exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months.¹

Barriers that prevent mothers from breastfeeding exclusively for the first 6 months are many and varied, ranging from the mother’s lack of knowledge, social norms, lack of family and social support, embarrassment with public nursing, lactation problems, employment and child care issues, and concerns about sexuality and breastfeeding to barriers related to health services, including the lack of knowledge and/or support from medical professionals.³ ⁴ In an effort to increase breastfeeding duration rates in Indiana, focus group participants explored ways to improve the breastfeeding environment in their community.⁵ Among the many comments made by participants was their clear desire for easy access to services in a convenient location and during convenient hours. In 2012, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) awarded grant money to 6 states with the intent to expand community support for breastfeeding. In the state of Indiana, grant funding was awarded to the Indiana State Department of Health, made it possible to open a second drop-in location in June 2013. Future plans include developing an employee lactation program and expanding Well Babies at Walgreens at other store locations.

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context, we used our allocation of the CDC grant funds received from the ISDH to expand Well Babies at Walgreens, allowing us to offer easily accessible breastfeeding support to mothers at a community pharmacy. To our knowledge, breastfeeding support is currently not available at another pharmacy anywhere in the state of Indiana. Community collaboration between a nonprofit organization and a health care destination may exist elsewhere, but we did not model our program after another current program.

Program Summary

The Well Babies at Walgreens program began as a collaborative partnership between Walgreens pharmacy and the Indiana Perinatal Network (IPN). Walgreens is a community drugstore chain in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands with more than 8000 locations. Most Walgreens locations are community pharmacies with a retail space in the front of the store and a health care space that includes a pharmacy and, in some locations, a clinic staffed by a nurse practitioner in the back of the store. The IPN is a nonprofit agency that supports the health of mothers and babies in Indiana. The first Walgreens pharmacy with a Well Babies drop-in was located in a vibrant and socioeconomically varied urban area north of downtown Indianapolis, home to approximately 133 440 individuals (64% white, 27% African American, 2% Asian, and 7% Hispanic or Latino). Census data indicate that, while the median household income in the township was $49 950, an estimated 25.4% of families with children younger than 5 years lived below the poverty level in this diverse geographic area.

The goal for the project was to provide a breastfeeding drop-in center for mothers and babies at a convenient location where the baby could be weighed and the mother could converse with a Certified Lactation Counselor (CLC) or an International Board-Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) about breastfeeding problems she was experiencing. The IPN provided an infant scale, the services of a lactation professional, and some supplies and marketing materials, while Walgreens provided the space, additional marketing, additional infant scales and supplies, and access to a pharmacist. Walgreens is committed to the concept of “community partnership” as an important way for the pharmacy to connect with the needs of the neighborhood in the surrounding area and for health care providers and breastfeeding advocates to develop an interdisciplinary approach to improving breastfeeding rates.

The first Well Babies at Walgreens drop-in started in April 2012, prior to the CDC grant. In June 2013, with the additional CDC funds, we were able to expand services at the first center and open a second location in an underserved area with higher African American and Latino populations. At these 2 locations, mothers “drop in” without an appointment to have their baby weighed and to meet with a CLC or IBCLC free of charge. The days and times of the Well Babies drop-in are the same every week at each location, making it easier for mothers to visit. The space for consultation, located adjacent to the pharmacy, is private with no security cameras and with opaque doors. Any written materials provided to mothers came from CDC or World Health Organization sources. The CDC grant funds allowed us to provide a free prenatal breastfeeding class “Well Baby 101,” we purchased prenatal education and marketing materials, and we paid for the services of the lactation professionals who staffed the Well Babies drop-in center. After the grant period ended in 2013, both Well Babies locations continue to operate thanks to the partnership between Walgreens and the IPN. Well Baby 101 has not been offered since 2013, since attendance was typically only 1 to 2 mothers per session. Grant monies were not used to open additional Well Babies locations because of concerns about sustainability and funding once the grant funding ended. Because of the grant, awareness of and interest in the breast pump rental program offered through the Walgreens pharmacy greatly increased, with the number of breast pumps rented increasing from 8 in 2012 to 53 in 2013—a 662% increase.

The Well Babies at Walgreens program is unique because it combines the expertise of a lactation consultant and access to a pharmacist at a convenient location with many available services (Figure 1). Parking is very close to the building, and both pharmacies are on a bus route. Well Babies at Walgreens does not bill for services, and no payment is collected from the mother. Families—not just mothers—are welcome; many fathers come to the drop-in clinics, both with and without their child’s mother, to ask breastfeeding questions. Following the visit, families can conveniently access the pharmacy, consult with a nurse practitioner clinic, or make purchases such as grocery or household items. In essence, our Walgreens drop-in centers eliminated several barriers that a focus group had indicated that, if removed, would improve the breastfeeding environment, which, in turn, might increase breastfeeding incidence and duration. All mothers are welcome, including breastfeeding mothers, mothers who feed both breast milk and formula, and formula-feeding mothers. There is an emphasis on teaching all mothers the benefits of breastfeeding and risks of formula feeding; mothers who are formula feeding are offered information on safe bottle preparation and safe practices for bottle feeding. Nursing mothers are supported and encouraged to reach their goals for breastfeeding.

Throughout 2013, a Walgreens pharmacist, the Walgreens home care specialist, the lactation professionals, and the breastfeeding coordinator from the IPN met at least quarterly to discuss progress, share success stories, and address challenges. During the grant period, a standardized form was used to collect data on the mothers using breastfeeding services. Aside from attendance, which ranged from 0 to 10 mothers per week, the group discussed feedback from mothers and feedback from health care professionals in the area. Some area
lactation professionals perceived the *Well Babies* program as a competition or a gimmick to make mothers purchase store items. In fact, no purchase was required to obtain the free weight check or to use the free consultation with the pharmacist or lactation consultant. More education in the community was needed to help these lactation consultants and breastfeeding advocates understand the tremendous unmet needs in the community and the opportunity to reach mothers in a convenient location where they already went. Feedback from mothers was positive, citing convenience and accessibility as their top priorities, as well as the importance of a cohesive experience where the store and the pharmacy are breastfeeding-friendly. Mothers commonly sought advice for latch issues, supply questions, and pumping questions when transitioning back to work after maternity leave. *Well Babies* is a drop-in for babies who are healthy. Babies who were not gaining weight or were ill were referred to a physician.

The original intent of the *Well Babies* program was to provide a breastfeeding drop-in center, but it was soon discovered that 2 hours per week of breastfeeding expertise per location was not adequate. Parents have breastfeeding questions at all times of the day and night; thus, teaching our pharmacists to respond within their scope of practice to the needs of nursing mothers was essential if we were to offer a program that met the needs of the community. While the literature suggests pharmacists can play a key role in breastfeeding promotion and support, few pharmacists receive adequate counseling-based training and lactation education, other than information about the safety and compatibility of medicines for women during breastfeeding. Pharmacists also need access to reliable, current resources to guide their advice about medication use to breastfeeding women. Thus, we used some of the CDC grant funds to enhance the knowledge and skills of local pharmacists who have contact with breastfeeding women. Specifically, we used grant funds to pay for 2 Walgreens pharmacists to attend a 40-hour CLC training and become certified. We purchased reference materials, including a copy of Hale’s *Medications and Mothers’ Milk 2012: A Manual of Lactational Pharmacology*, for approximately 70 Walgreens pharmacies and 15 nurse practitioner clinics located within Walgreens stores in central Indiana. All pharmacy managers and clinic managers were given a brief mandatory training on how to use the reference materials. The director of *Well Babies* contributed to the development of a free, online continuing education course in conjunction with Northeastern University, which we offered to pharmacists in the area, not just the locations with the *Well Babies* drop-in. The director of *Well Babies* also developed a live continuing education presentation that was given at Butler University as part of their annual continuing education event. None of the pharmacists were required to complete continuing education training on medication and lactation, but pharmacists at all sites, especially those with a *Well Babies* drop-in, have been encouraged to do so. Each pharmacy has 3 to 6 pharmacists on staff depending on the volume of the store. The pharmacy manager at the original *Well Babies* location is the director for the program and is CLC certified. The second CLC-certified pharmacist is located at a second Walgreens site on the east side of Indianapolis. Both CLC-certified pharmacists serve as a resource for other Walgreens pharmacists. Patients will not always encounter a pharmacist with adequate training on medication and lactation, but providing multiple layers of resources has allowed pharmacists who are not as knowledgeable to reach out to pharmacists with additional training when needed.

**Barriers to Sustainability and Expansion**

The *Well Babies* program faces challenges in sustainability and efforts for expansion. One practical consideration is that, because lactation professionals are not typically employed by a pharmacy, Walgreens currently has no position code or job description for a lactation consultant, preventing the pharmacy from being able to hire or pay the consultant. Second, many pharmacists do not receive sufficient training on medication and lactation or the need to support breastfeeding mothers. Further education is needed both in pharmacy schools and through affordable continuing education opportunities. Perhaps the biggest barrier is in billing for lactation services. The US Affordable Care Act of 2010 requires coverage for lactation services, but provision of such services in a pharmacy environment is not part of the typical model for reimbursement. Many of the outpatient lactation services in Indiana are currently offered at no charge, since lactation consultants do not have state license numbers, and billing outside of a hospital or physician’s office is difficult. Work is needed to determine how billing for lactation services at the pharmacy can be successfully achieved.
The Future for Well Babies

The 2013 CDC grant funds provided an excellent start for our Well Babies program. Our current work focuses on sustainability and generalizability to additional pharmacy sites. A business case in development will show the demand, profitability, and potential impact of offering breastfeeding support in a community pharmacy. To justify hiring lactation consultants at a pharmacy, it becomes necessary to show the business impact and how the work of the lactation consultant and breastfeeding drop-in will align with company goals and initiatives. During the grant period, Walgreens employees attended “Well Baby 101” classes and the Well Babies drop-in, demonstrating the interest in more breastfeeding services for employees. Well Babies creators are in the process of developing an employee lactation program to pilot in the Indianapolis area based on feedback from employees who are interested in personally using Well Babies. This program will provide education, support, and information about insurance benefits such as breast pumps and supplies to Walgreens employees.

Development of the Well Babies program discovered unmet educational needs for pharmacists in the area of lactation and medication use. In addition, the literature supports the argument that more education is needed for pharmacy students and pharmacists on medication and lactation, as well as counseling breastfeeding mothers. Through university lectures, continuing education credits, experiential rotations in women’s health for pharmacy students and a pharmacy resident, and multiple Doctor of Pharmacy candidate research projects focused in this area, the Well Babies program and its director are reaching students and pharmacists in Indiana to provide better patient care for nursing mothers beyond our Well Babies sites.

The impact of Well Babies at Walgreens extends beyond a weekly drop-in at 2 locations. At these Indiana locations, a breastfeeding drop-in shows the community that breastfeeding support needs to be accessible, easy, and mainstream. On a company-wide scale, offering breastfeeding support at more pharmacy locations would add a new dimension to preventive health services. Walgreens pharmacies provide many preventive health services, including health screenings, medication therapy management counseling sessions, and immunizations. Numerous studies have shown the protective effect of breastfeeding against a wide range of acute and chronic illnesses such as otitis media, asthma, and diabetes. Well Babies aligns with Walgreens’ company initiatives to help patients pursue health and wellness. Well Babies creators have a business plan in development to pursue additional partnership and funding for program expansion. In pursuit of better continuity of care for mothers and babies, the first strategic partnership with a neighboring hospital system to staff one Well Babies location began in February 2015. In this model, lactation professionals from the hospital will staff the breastfeeding drop-in at the pharmacy location once a week.

Recommendations

Breastfeeding support at a community pharmacy fills an important gap in care. Mothers who give birth in a hospital or birthing center may or may not have access to a lactation consultant. Even those who do get a good start with breastfeeding may have difficulty finding support in the community after discharge when breastfeeding questions arise. A pharmacy that supports breastfeeding can provide help through a drop-in center staffed by a lactation consultant, as well as pharmacist recommendations that support the breastfeeding goals of the mother, which will encourage her to continue to nurse her child. Collaborative community partnerships, such as the Well Babies partnership between the IPN and Walgreens, are a good way to form a program that meets the needs of the community and enhances continuity of care through an interdisciplinary approach.

Conclusion

The Well Babies program addresses a current gap in care at the pharmacy level by bringing breastfeeding support to the community pharmacy. A lactation consultant and a pharmacist are available for free consultation, and the location is accessible and convenient. Moving forward, more work is needed to establish expansion of the program at additional pharmacy locations. Enhancements to make this possible include work on a model for billing for breastfeeding services at the pharmacy, providing more education in pharmacy school and through continuing education opportunities, and developing an employee lactation program that will also use Well Babies services. Encouraging the community to support breastfeeding and achieve breastfeeding goals means mothers, babies, and families will have more tools to be happy and healthy.

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References