

Chapter 58

Human Breast Milk and Breastfeeding within the Context of Basic Health Services

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Although healthcare services are recognized as one of the fundamental human rights, it is unfortunate that a great many people cannot access these services adequately (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Based on the view that healthcare services cannot be accessed adequately all over the world, a health care conference was held in Alma-Ata in 1978. At the conference, healthcare services that every human has a right to access were determined and were declared as basic health services (WHO, 1978).

Basic health services are defined as essential health care which can be accessed by the majority of individuals and families in a community through their full participation at a cost that the community and the country can afford. Basic health services, the first step of health care, can also be viewed as preventive healthcare services for people and the environment (WHO, 1978). Within this context, it is just normal to investigate the relationship between basic health services, and human breast milk and breastfeeding process. When the role of human breast milk is investigated within the scope of preventive healthcare services, the importance of human breast milk will become clearly evident.

When the relationship between the types of healthcare services, and human breast milk and breastfeeding is investigated, several factors are taken into account. Health education, which takes the first place among these factors, refers to health practices which are performed to help individuals and society adopt and implement measures needed for a healthy life, to make them get accustomed to utilizing health services provided for them, to persuade people to improve their health and environment, and to encourage them to make shared decisions and put these decisions into practice. In public health, health education is based on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention is directed to healthy people. The aim of primary prevention is to protect individuals and society from health risks (Çetinkaya *et al.*, 2011). Within this context, the mother's, infant's and community's health can be improved by providing education to individuals and community on topics such as nutrition, human breast milk and breastfeeding. Breastfeeding education to be provided as a part of health education in primary prevention is particularly associated with the improvement of health and promotion of the quality of life.

Early diagnosis, which takes the second place, refers to the diagnosis and treatment of a disease when it is a symptomatic, it has not caused any harm yet or its symptoms are in the early stage. Early diagnosis, an essential component of secondary prevention, prevents disease-related complications from emerging and ensures cheaper treatment (Çetinkaya *et al.*, 2011). Early diagnosis and treatment of mastitis, one of the problems encountered in the process of breastfeeding, will prevent the development of breast abscesses. It will also reduce breastfeeding women's risk of

developing breast cancer.

Immunization, which takes the third place, is the implementation of all the required vaccines to at-risk individuals. Immunization is the most effective way of prevention of infectious diseases. Active immunization is carried out through vaccination (Günay, 2011). Human breast milk is known to increase the effectiveness of vaccines. Therefore, it can be said that breastfeeding has positive health effects on immunization.

Family planning, which takes the fourth-place, refers to families' making their own decision on the number of children they could look after by spacing and timing of their children's births. Family planning is not the limiting of the number of children. It allows families to have a desired number of children, and more importantly, it allows them to have babies when they are ready to have one (Öztürk, 2011). Breastfeeding helps to naturally extend the duration between two pregnancies through the effective and appropriate use of the lactational amenorrhea method during the postpartum period. In addition, natural prolongation of the time between two pregnancies contributes to the woman's physiological and psychological relief. It is also known that breastfeeding reduces women's ovarian or uterine cancer risks.

Nutrition, which takes the fifth place, refers to the intake and use of food by the body for growth and development. On the other hand, adequate and balanced nutrition refers to the optimum provision of food and energy to a person depending on his/her age, gender and specific conditions so that his/her body could maintain its normal functions (Aykut, 2011). Through nutrition education given to mothers on the encouragement of breastfeeding during lactation, mothers can manage to effectively use their food storage both for the baby and for themselves, as a result of which mothers' and babies' nutritional problems and mothers' osteoporosis risk are reduced.

The only food which alone is enough for the nutrition of an infant during the first 6 months of its life and has the most outstanding features is human breast milk. Human breast milk is the best and very special food produced for the baby and meets the baby's nutrition requirements at any age of the baby after birth (Aykut, 2011). This is due to its immunological characteristics and its being a physiological food thanks to bioactive ingredients in it. All of these issues regarding human breast milk should be recognized and emphasized within the scope of basic health services. It is clear that attempts related to human breast milk and breastfeeding would contribute to the breastfeeding process in particular and to the basic health services in general.

When the role of human breast milk in environmental health protection in basic health services is investigated, it will be possible to emphasize the importance of human breast milk in this field. When the relationship between environmental health protection and human breast milk and breastfeeding is considered, the first thing to recognize is to ensure the provision of adequate and clean drinking water, since healthy and abundant water supports life and its continuity. Unhealthy and inadequate water poses a threat to life and health (Ceyhan & Gün, 2011). It is recommended that babies should only be fed with human breast milk during the first 6 months of their lives.

Humans produce various solid or liquid wastes when they maintain their daily lives or carry out commercial and economic activities, and the second issue in environmental health protection is the disposal of these human wastes in accordance

with health requirements. If these wastes are not properly disposed of in the allocated places, individual and family health will inevitably be affected adversely (Ceyhan & Gün, 2011). Since human breast milk does not produce any waste materials, it is an environmentally friendly product and contributes to environmental health.

The third issue in environmental health protection is the food hygiene which refers to compliance with hygiene rules during the process in which food is purchased, stored, prepared, cooked and served (Bilici *et al.*, 2008). Since human breast milk is a sterile, ready-to-serve food prepared and stored at an appropriate temperature in breasts, it is the only food product which thoroughly complies with hygiene rules.

The fourth issue in environmental health protection is the housing hygiene. Housing meets one of the basic needs of people: need for shelter. For the continuation and promotion of human health, proper plans related to housing health should be prepared (Ceyhan & Gün, 2011). When the baby is born, it needs to stay in skin-to-skin contact with its mother. The baby's skin to skin contact with the mother makes it easier to start the breastfeeding so it contributes to the healthy breastfeeding process. That a baby needs no other shelter but only its mother's body is one of the most important points in the initiation of breastfeeding process.

The fifth issue in the protection of environmental health is the fight against environmental and air pollution. The main cause of air pollution in modern era is the widespread use of fossil fuels. The use of fossil fuels for industrial production and the heating of houses has been an important factor causing air pollution. Another leading cause of air pollution is the exhaust emissions from automobile engines (Ceyhan & Gün, 2011). Therefore, human breast milk is one of the most important factors contributing to the prevention of environmental pollution because it is a completely environmentally friendly product that does not require any preparation. Carbon footprint left by formulas during their preparation, storage and distribution phases shows dramatically major differences compared to that left by human breast milk. Carbon footprint left by human breast milk is at a minimal level, almost zero.

In addition, UNICEF's GOBI [growth monitoring (G), oral rehydration therapy for diarrhea (O), the promotion of breastfeeding (B) and childhood immunizations (I)] strategy of 1982 has been considered low-cost revolution in child health. However, these measures were thought to be insufficient in having the child mortality rate and thus the program was expanded in 1990, and birth spacing/family planning (F), food supplementation (F) and the promotion of female literacy (F) were added to GOBI and the strategy was called GOBI-FFF (Claeson & Waldman, 2000). It's evident that breastfeeding will contribute to the elimination of all the aforementioned issues in all aspects. It is of great importance that policy makers and managers should be aware of, support and promote breastfeeding's contribution to programs such as basic health services and GOBI-FFF. Moreover, breastfeeding will raise the development level of Turkey due to its positive effects not only on maternal and infant health but also on the reduction of infant mortality rates.

Furthermore, while the strategy in conventional healthcare is to treat illnesses, it is to protect and promote the health in basic health services (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Therefore, all the interventions regarding human breast milk and breastfeeding directly affect the protection and promotion of health.

While another strategy in conventional healthcare is to provide healthcare for the

sick, in basic health services, the aim is to provide continuous healthcare for everybody (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Within this context, continuous training and counseling for breastfeeding constitute a good opportunity not only for pregnant women but also for healthy people, and inform the whole community on the issue. Continuous training and counseling also play a very important role in the continuity of healthcare provided for healthy individuals.

In the conventional healthcare the focus is on specific problems. However, basic health services deal with health as a whole (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Within this context, training provided for people on breastfeeding has led to an increase in the number of breastfed babies, which brings about positive contributions to mothers' and infants' health. These contributions have an important part in the large-scale health approach.

Another difference between the conventional healthcare and basic health services is that while the former focuses on physician-centered healthcare, the latter one emphasizes the importance of teamwork (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). In this context, it is the health professionals' responsibility to raise awareness of the importance of human breast milk and breastfeeding. Therefore, basic health services gains importance since it can create an environment where team members can work together. Through appropriate training and counseling provided by physicians, midwives and nurses, many problems can be eliminated before they arise.

Another noteworthy difference between the conventional healthcare and basic health services are that while the former deals with health issues with specialist physicians, the latter attempts to solve health problems with general practitioners (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). In Turkey, the first step in primary healthcare where counseling on human breast milk and breastfeeding is provided is family health centers. Through the training and practices given by physicians working in family health centers, solutions to many problems could be developed before they occur. In addition, general practitioners' cost effective works might contribute to the national economy.

While in the conventional healthcare, the society bears a passive role, in the basic health services, the society is expected to play an active role in healthcare (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). If the society actively takes part in and takes responsibility for trainings, training can take its place among the easily performed and widely acclaimed activities. Active participation of a society in activities related to human breast milk and breastfeeding would remarkably contribute to the development of a health-conscious community.

The last but not the least difference between the conventional healthcare and basic health services is that health is in the realm of healthcare sector in the conventional healthcare whereas basic health services sees health as intersectoral collaboration (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Human breast milk and breastfeeding are definitely an area that requires intersectoral collaboration with a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore, human milk and breastfeeding are of an important place in achieving national and international collaboration from the different sectors.

In addition, the fifth article of the Declaration of Alma-Ata refers to healthcare services considered essential in minimal healthcare (Erci & Tuncel, 1991). Contribution of human breast milk to health education of the public, one of these healthcare services, is realized through this breastfeeding training provided for the community. The contribution of human breast milk to the improvement of nutrition is

proved by the fact that infants fed only with human breast milk in the first 6 months of their lives are healthier and grow and develop better than infants fed by formulas. The contribution of human breast milk to maternal and child health is that human breast milk protects mothers and their babies against diseases. Breastfeeding contributes to family planning by extending the time between pregnancies. Therefore, it is obvious that human breast milk and breastfeeding directly contribute to aforementioned health care services.

When all these factors are taken into consideration, it is recommended that health professionals should give training and counseling regarding breast milk and breastfeeding to pregnant women and their partners during the last trimester and should provide support during the intrapartum and postpartum periods, which is expected to increase breastfeeding rates (Yurtsal, 2014). Due to its contributions to mothers' and infants' health in particular and to the community health and environmental health in general, breastfeeding can be considered as an essential element of basic health services.

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