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# Experiences of Women Who Donated Human Milk

Laura M. Candelaria, Diane L. Spatz, and Noreen Giordano

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the experiences of women who donated breast milk to a hospital-based milk bank regulated under the policies and procedures set forth by the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA).

**Design:** Qualitative, phenomenological design.

**Setting:** The Mothers' Milk Bank in a children's hospital in the Northeastern region of the United States.

**Participants:** Twelve HMBANA-approved milk donors older than 21 years with infants hospitalized in the NICU.

**Methods:** Edmund Husserl's design of interpretive phenomenology and Colaizzi's method of data analysis were used for this study. Participants were interviewed using a face-to-face, semistructured interview format.

**Results:** Four themes represented the experience of donating breast milk: *Ripple of Hope and Help*, *Dynamic Interplay of Nurture*, *Standing on the Shoulders of Others*, and *Sharing Their Stories*. Donors felt proud and accomplished to provide hope for other infants and families. Nurses were crucial in facilitating and motivating donors and making donation achievable in a supportive environment. Donors felt compelled to share their experiences to teach and motivate others to donate.

**Conclusion:** For our participants, donation of human milk was a positive, valuable, and nurturing experience. Donors reported feelings of increased self-esteem during donation that motivated them to "give back" and continue. The support of a well-trained nursing staff is essential for donors to meet their personal goals.

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## Keywords

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Human milk is considered the most complete form of infant nutrition because it provides health, growth, development, and immunity benefits (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2012). Human milk feedings should be considered an integral part of the care of the healthy, preterm, and/or critically ill or vulnerable infant. The AAP (2012) recommended that if a mother's own milk is unavailable or its use is contraindicated, appropriately fortified and pasteurized donor human milk (DHM) should be used. Human milk donation is a process in which a breastfeeding woman donates pumped milk to be used for a child other than her own. The milk can be donated to a milk bank where it is screened and pasteurized. In many hospitals across the United States, DHM has become integrated into practice as a standard of care for vulnerable infants when a mother's own milk is unavailable. Donor human milk is increasingly used in NICUs to achieve exclusive human milk feedings in preterm infants because it is better tolerated than commercial formulas and offers a protective effect against necrotizing enterocolitis (Carroll & Herrmann,

2013). To meet the demand for DHM, an adequate number of women who donate is necessary.

## Background

In 1985, the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) was established to develop standards for all North American milk banks (HMBANA, 2017). Although milk banking rapidly declined during the mid-1980s because of concerns related to HIV, the number of milk banks in the United States has steadily increased since then. In 2016, 18 HMBANA-approved milk banks in the United States dispensed 5.2 million ounces of DHM across North America and Canada (HMBANA, 2017).

Although physiologic benefits of donor milk for infants have been identified, the psychosocial benefits for a woman who donates are less clearly understood. The motivation to donate depends on multiple factors, including the donor's age, education, political beliefs, culture, and financial

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**Although researchers have addressed the physiologic benefits of donor human milk for infants, the psychosocial benefits for a woman who donates are less clearly understood.**

position, and maternity care providers can motivate mothers to donate. In a study conducted in Brazil, the most commonly reported reason for donating was the encouragement of a health professional (Thomaz et al., 2008).

Breastfeeding self-efficacy is a salient variable in breastfeeding duration because it predicts whether a mother will choose to breastfeed, how much effort she will expend, whether she will persevere until mastery is achieved, whether she will have self-enhancing or self-defeating thought patterns, and how she will emotionally respond to difficulties (Dennis, 2003). Dennis (2003) first proposed the use of the Breastfeeding Self-Efficacy Scale for mothers of healthy infants. This scale can also provide a valid and reliable measure of breastfeeding self-efficacy among mothers of ill or preterm infants (Wheeler & Dennis, 2013).

Once a mother achieves breastfeeding mastery, she may be a candidate for donation. However, mothers of premature and vulnerable infants in critical care settings face many additional difficulties that can make breastfeeding more challenging. Parents of infants admitted to the NICU experience greater levels of distress, including increased anxiety, depression, and trauma symptoms, than parents of healthy infants (Roque, Lasiuk, Radnz, & Hegadoren, 2017).

There is a dearth of research on understanding the essence of a donor's personal experience. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the phenomena of the lived experience of the milk donor. The primary research question for this study was *What is the lived experience of mothers of hospitalized infants who donate their milk to a HMBANA milk bank?* A secondary research question was *Is there is a changing dynamic in the perception of one's self during and following milk donation to a HMBANA milk bank?*

## Methods

### Design

We used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to develop an understanding of the essence of the phenomena of donation. Husserl's

design of interpretive phenomenology was chosen because of the poor conceptualization of the phenomenon of interest (Polit & Beck, 2004). When there is limited information on a topic, a phenomenological approach is recommended (Creswell, 2009). Semistructured, face-to-face interviews were used to explore the lived experiences of women who donated breast milk. This type of semistructured interview helped guide the conversation and allowed each participant to focus on her individual experience. Participants were asked to describe their donation experiences, how being a donor made them feel, and their greatest facilitating and motivating factors.

### Sample and Setting

This study took place over a 9-month period from December 2015 to September 2016 at a large children's hospital in the Northeastern region of the United States with an onsite HMBANA milk bank. Inclusion criteria were that women were older than 21 years of age, were fluent in English, and met the HMBANA criteria to donate milk. The HMBANA has indicated that donors should undergo a telephone screening process to ascertain whether they are in good health, are not regularly taking most medications or herbal substances, are willing to undergo blood testing at the milk bank's expense, and have least 100 ounces of milk to donate (HMBANA, 2015). Women who used illegal drugs, smoked, drank regularly, or used tobacco products; had recent blood transfusions or organ or tissue transplantations; or tested positive or were at greater risk for HIV, human T-lymphotropic virus, hepatitis B or C, or syphilis were excluded from donating (HMBANA, 2015). Further exclusion criteria included bereaved donors, donors who were compensated for their breast milk, and those who donated informally.

A demographic questionnaire was created to collect information with regard to age, marital status, location of current and past births, past infant feeding practices, and history of donation. After an extensive literature review on current practices and trends in milk banking and donation, the researcher consulted with several leading experts in the field and dissertation committee members to create a semistructured interview guide with one grand tour question and several open-ended subquestions. Open-ended interview questions, based on the current state of the literature pertaining to human milk donation, were developed to guide the interview process, ensure the emergence of similar data,

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