Breastfeeding and the Baby Friendly Experience

By ALLISON LINVILLE

“Our job is to make mothers successful,” says Debbi Foss, RN and Lactation Consultant for the Birth Center at North Valley Hospital. Debbi is in the nursery at the Birth Center with other registered nurses Sandy Beale, Lactation Counselor, and Cindy Walp, Birth Center Director, talking about how to make breastfeeding easier for new moms. It’s hard to imagine walking into an “office,” (albeit a nontraditional one), and finding a group of professionals more passionate about what they do for work than this group of women.

Every August, which is National Breastfeeding Month, the Birth Center from North Valley Hospital joins with the Breastfeeding Coalition and other community organizations to put on the Breastfeeding Fair. Cindy Walp explains that the event is to bring together moms from the community with an abundance of resources that can offer support and education about breastfeeding.

Walp is clearly committed to helping mothers learn to breastfeed. As an advocate for breastfeeding, she works on the Board of Directors with the Flathead Valley Breastfeeding Coalition and researches how breastfeeding can build healthy families and communities. “The CDC lists breastfeeding as a goal in the Healthy People 2020 project, which was created to establish health guidelines for the population to grow and improve overall wellness.” One goal of the project is to increase the nationwide percentage of infants who are breastfed from 74% to 81% by the year 2020. Walp continues, “The health benefits to the mother, baby, and entire family are numerous. Breastfeeding offers not only food and nutrients to your baby, it’s about nurturing, bonding, and building relationships. It can reduce the risk of diabetes and obesity in mom and baby, prevent against illnesses and infections, improve dental health, and even reduce the effects of postpartum depression.”

Encouraging breastfeeding and offering educational resources also goes hand-in-hand with the Baby Friendly certification that the Birth Center is working toward. Baby Friendly USA has partnered with the World Health Organization and UNICEF on the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, which encourages breastfeeding, skin-to-skin contact, and “rooming in,” or keeping the mother and baby together in the hospital. North Valley Hospital is about one year away from becoming a designated Baby Friendly Hospital.

“We offer free classes and lactation consultations starting with prenatal education, in addition to support for moms-to-be. Birth Center registered nurses are trained in the same breastfeeding message and terminology, so we all give the same information to keep it from being confusing,” Walp says she always recommends a Mother and Baby Support Group, which meets weekly in Whitefish, to new moms. In the event that the mother cannot breastfeed (usually due to medical complications), or chooses not to breastfeed, the couple are still offered full support and the same benefits of rooming in with their baby, in addition to education and support for formula preparation and feeding.

The Birth Center has a 98% success rate for mothers who want to breastfeed and are able to with some assistance from the nurses. “Everyone needs a little help at first, even though it is a natural process. It requires some one-on-one time with lactation experts and nurses, and we’re able to do that here,” says Sandy Beale. Beale explains that the environment in the birth center promotes education and making individual, informed choices about breastfeeding “We don’t push anything on anyone. We just offer education, help, resources, and support.”

Beale and Foss also note what an accomplishment it feels like for mothers who want to breastfeed and need some assistance at first. “Ask for help!” says Foss. “It can make all the different in the world.” Beale chimed in, “Breastfeeding helps the mother to feel empowered, and that’s something we love. We want to empower all moms with education, assistance, and support.”

For more information about the North Valley Hospital Birth Center, please visit: mshosp.org and click on Services/ the Birth Center.