

Culture of Support

DR. PAULA SCHRECK PROVIDES ENCOURAGEMENT AND EDUCATION TO BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS

"For every month that a mother breastfeeds, she decreases her child's risk of obesity, and that decreases the risk of diabetes and hypertension," explains Dr. Paula Schreck, breastfeeding coordinator at St. John Providence, who also maintains a part-time pediatrics practice within the health system.

But while national breastfeeding rates have risen slightly from 74 percent in the CDC's 2009 Breastfeeding Report Card to nearly 77 percent in the 2013 report, the state of Michigan still lags behind the national average at 75 percent. Broken down even further, only 34 percent of mothers in Michigan are breastfeeding exclusively at three months (meaning no formula is supplemented), and only 13 percent are breastfeeding exclusively at six months.

"There are many barriers to breastfeeding," Schreck says. "I think the biggest one is the fact that mothers aren't aware of the benefits. If they don't discuss the benefits of breastfeeding with their health care providers, they may have the impression that artificial feeding, or formula, is similar to or just the same as breastfeeding."

And the perception parents get from the media, advertisements, grocery stores and drugstores that formula is adequate or just as good, Schreck says, doesn't help pediatricians like her who strive to properly educate parents about all aspects of breastfeeding.

"The No. 1 barrier is lack of education," she says. "I find that no matter what your background, and no matter where you come from, most women are open to trying breastfeeding if given the correct information."

After recognizing there was a great need for supporting mothers after discharge, Schreck started the St. John Providence Outpatient Breastfeeding Clinic, the first physician-led clinic of its kind in Michigan. At the clinic, Schreck and her team of lactation consultants are able to address common problems with breastfeeding, in addition to complex problems that require a physician's input, such as cleft lip and palate, and developmental or neurological issues.

"I certainly would like to see breastfeeding ... as the normal way to feed your baby," Schreck says. "I really want breastfeeding to be 'This is how we feed human babies. Breastfeeding is normal.' So, it takes the stigma out of breastfeeding, which has been present for so long."

Schreck is also reaching beyond the traditional hospital role and involving the community as medical director of the St. John Mother Nurture Project, the grant-funded arm of the hospital's breastfeeding support services. Through a \$1.2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Mother Nurture Project launched a comprehensive breastfeeding program that provides direct health services, community-based programming and the development of best practices, such as skin-to-skin and rooming in.

"Breastfeeding is the great equalizer," she says. "It doesn't matter what your ZIP code is. It doesn't matter what your insurance is. You can provide the best food for your baby."

Under Schreck's leadership, St. John Providence Breastfeeding Support Services created the Mother Nurture Lactation College in 2013, in partnership with the Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association and supported by two grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, plus additional federal grants and




Paula Schreck

other funders. The program provides a unique model for women in the Detroit community to achieve International Board of Certified Lactation Consultants status, and also addresses the racial disparity that exists in Michigan, as there are fewer than 10 African American lactation consultants in the state.

"The more people who are successful at breastfeeding and enjoy breastfeeding, the more people are going to go along with that choice," Schreck says. "That's the stance we've taken at St. John."

St. John Hospital and Medical Center took a huge step forward in 2014 when the hospital was officially designated as Baby-Friendly, a certification created in 1991 by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund as part of a global initiative to increase breastfeeding rates worldwide. The initiative recognizes hospitals that provide optimal level of care for infant feeding and mother/baby bonding. The designation earned St. John the distinction as Detroit's first and Michigan's second Baby-Friendly hospital.

"Our city needed this," Schreck says. "We need to move the needle on infant mortality, and we need to start before babies are born. And Baby-Friendly is an evidence-based way to address not only breastfeeding outcomes, but also infant outcomes."

As she moves forward, Schreck hopes to replicate the programs that she and her team have built at the Detroit campus at other sites in the health system. "I hope to be an ambassador for what a hospital can do for a community – how we cannot only affect what goes on inside our walls, but ... also what goes on inside our neighborhood, in our city and in our state. Hospitals really have the opportunity to set the tone," she says. "I hope that other hospitals will also be inspired to know that what they do in their birthing center doesn't just stay there, it goes out into the community."  — Audrey LaForest