

## Promoting mother's milk: Hospitals dumping free formula gift bags

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New mother Mari Perez feeds her newborn at OU Children's Hospital. (Photo by Brent Fuchs)

OKLAHOMA CITY – There is no such thing as a free lunch, unless you're a newborn drinking formula at a hospital. Becky Mannel is leading the charge to encourage breast-feeding, working with hospitals to give up the free bag of formula that is sent home with new mothers. And the most expensive part of the project isn't the cost of formula; it's training staff members to give consistent, up-to-date advice, said Mannel, lactation service coordinator at OU Medical Center.

While it's no surprise that Oklahoma ranks 48th in the nation for health outcomes, according to [a new report](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state also has a lower percentage of breast-feeding mothers.

Mannel has helped two dozen local hospitals agree to dump the formula gift bag, in order to encourage breast-feeding and lower infant mortality. Six hospitals, including two operated by OU Medical Center, have already dumped the formula bag.

"The hospital inadvertently is marketing a specific, expensive brand-name formula," Mannel said.

The goal of the project is to eliminate marketing of these specific brands to families, not to entirely eliminate formula from the hospital setting. Promoting breast-feeding and sending home formula gift bags sends a mixed message to mothers, she said.

Most hospitals don't actually pay for formula. And a perceived financial effect is a valid concern, she said. But adding the cost of formula into a hospital's budget is negligible, Mannel said.

In fact, a 2011 study, "Cost Comparison of Baby Friendly and Non-Baby Friendly Hospitals in the United States," published in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that there was not a significant cost difference between so-called baby-friendly hospitals and ones that keep newborns in nurseries and feed them formula when it is not medically necessary.

"What (a hospital is) really going to spend on staff training, that is more costly than the formula," Mannel said.

Many hospital procedures, such as keeping newborns in a nursery and feeding them formula, are easier on staff members, but not necessarily what is best for families, Mannel said. Because hospitals have been giving away formula for about 25 years, there is a cultural change that has to happen, too, she said.

The most common complaint she hears from mothers is the lack of consistent advice on how to breast-feed; five different staff members could give five different opinions. The most common request from nurses around the state is for the most current information and practices on breast-feeding.

"We don't tolerate that in other areas of the hospital," Mannel said. "We want all staff to be on the same page."

Scrapping the free formula gift bag is not intended to force mothers to breast-feed, Mannel said.

"If we put the right environment in place, we can have more and more mothers choose to breast-feed and they should be more successful in breast-feeding," she said.