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Inside Canada's only breast milk bank

Women from coast to coast are donating to, or using, the breast milk bank at BC Women's Hospital in Vancouver. This mom did both

By Cori Howard



It was 48 hours after delivering her first baby, a 9.1-pound boy, that Simone Brooks was told **he wasn't breathing properly and had to be moved to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)**. Shuffling along beside the bassinet, Brooks tried to ignore the panic welling inside her chest. But as she crossed the yellow sunshine mosaic on the floor in the lobby of the NICU at BC Women's Hospital & Health Centre in Vancouver, the then-33-year-old teacher suddenly broke

down.

"I was thinking, this place is for other kids, not mine," she recalls now, four years later. "I was terrified and exhausted. I just couldn't stop crying." **Baby Markus was put on an IV and monitored for his breathing.** Brooks sat with him, trying to breastfeed. But her milk hadn't come in yet, and her baby was inconsolable. Still, when the nurses suggested Brooks feed him formula, she replied, "No way."

An alternative to formula

Instead, **she opted to use donated breast milk from Canada's only milk bank**, which she'd been told about during prenatal classes. She believed that breast milk was best for babies (see below)—that it would fight infection and provide her baby with antibodies to help him get better fast. After the syringes of milk arrived from the BC Women's Milk Bank (which is on the premises) and she fed Markus, he slept for five hours.

A history of milk banks

Until the late 1970s, there were more than 20 milk banks across Canada. But in the 1980s, they struggled to stay open amid fears about the risk of transmission of AIDS/HIV through breast milk.

The BC Women's Milk Bank is the only one to have survived, and it continues to use a strict screening process. In 2008, more than 100 women donated about 1,000 litres of milk, which were processed and given to about 1,100 children across the country. (Even after pasteurization and freezing, the milk is known to retain most of its healthy properties.)

How the milk bank survives

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The milk bank follows an often daunting regimen of interviews, blood tests, preparation and shipping, which doesn't make donating particularly easy. **But for many women, it can be highly rewarding, therapeutic—and worth every effort.**

Most of the women are motivated by altruism, says Frances Jones, coordinator for the milk bank and for BC Women's Hospital's lactation program, who notes that donors are not paid. "As corny as it sounds," she says, **"we're a bank run on love."**

It's certainly not run on money. **The milk bank operates on donations** and, constantly short of funds, can't even afford to pay for shipping. Women who donate milk—many of whom are short on money themselves—must pay for the bottles to store their breast milk, and pay to ship their milk to the milk bank (if they do not live in Vancouver). Recipients at BC Women's don't pay for the donor milk, but for others, shipping fees and a processing fee applies.

Who are these generous milk donors? **Some of them simply feel blessed to have extra milk** and want to help others who may be struggling. Others donate if they've had premature babies and end up with more of their own expressed milk than they need. And then there are the donors whose newborns have died and who want to honour their own child's life by saving another.

For women receiving donor milk, the reasons are plenty, including a major postpartum bleed. Donor milk also goes to women who have had breast reduction surgery in the past (which sometimes complicates breastfeeding), women with HIV, or those who simply have difficulty breastfeeding or don't produce enough milk.

How donated breast milk helped Markus

In the days following Markus's birth, **his breathing improved**, but he was diagnosed with a heart murmur and a hole in his heart (doctors say it will either eventually repair itself or require surgery sometime in the future). Nonetheless, on day five, with her own breast milk flowing, Simone Brooks felt joy and relief when she was able to take her baby home.

Life went on, and when Markus was six months old, Brooks fed him his first food: a pablum containing dairy products. Immediately, his face broke out in hives. Pediatric gastroenterologist Dr. Mark Kovacs determined **he was allergic to cow's milk** and commended her decision not to feed her baby formula when he was in the NICU, since it might have caused complications. (Life-threatening allergy to cow's milk proteins is exceptionally rare.)

"The important message here," stresses Kovacs, "is that **breast milk improves immunologic development and enhances babies' immune systems.**" Those fed breast milk exclusively for six months to one year, he adds, have lower rates of common childhood infections, as well as lower rates of allergies (Markus's experience notwithstanding).

The impact of the breast milk bank

For hundreds of women and their babies across Canada, **the milk bank has been a godsend**. Housed in a tiny storeroom at BC Women's Hospital, the milk bank is a hive of activity. With three pasteurizing machines and four huge freezers, it takes two part-time employees working full tilt to keep up with demand. Says Jones, opening the freezer doors to display hundreds of frozen bags and bottles, "We're always looking for donors. We can keep the milk for up to a year. But it goes out almost as fast as we can process it."

Upstairs in an office crowded with desks piled with paper, Jones opens the milk bank's scrapbook. In it are hundreds of letters from women who have donated or used the bank. Some include photos of babies hooked up to IVs, and beside those photos are smiling ones of the same babies at home, months later.

One woman, who produced too much milk for her newborn, wrote about how she heard there were premature triplets on the ward when she was in recovery after giving birth. "My milk would go to waste if I didn't donate it," she wrote. "I'm glad it went to help tiny babies who really needed it."

Another woman wrote that **after her baby boy died, donating her milk was "a small legacy in his name."**

A recipient of donor milk in Alberta wrote: "Thank you for your help when we so desperately needed it. I would like to see a milk bank in my province to help babies like mine."

And this from another recipient, in Ontario: "We are so blessed to be on your program, and I would like to thank every woman individually, if I could. When we adopted our baby, we weren't sure about her health, but at a year, I can't imagine a healthier baby. I'm sure this is, in large part, due to your program."

As for Brooks, she is still hoping the hole in her son's heart will heal itself. So far, he has fared well. And when she gave birth to daughter Maya two years ago, Brooks pumped daily for the milk bank for 11 months; she'd feed Maya on one breast and have a pump going at the same time on the other.

"It was my way of showing appreciation to the mom who took the time to help my baby and take away my stress. **Anyone can give money. But it can't buy breast milk.**"

Why Mom's milk is so good

For many years, formula was believed to be the superior choice. Today, **the World Health Organization and other medical groups worldwide advocate breastfeeding as the healthiest option for children.**

Breast milk reduces the risk of infections, chronic diseases and obesity. Formula is accepted as the runner-up, but with some health consequences: For one thing, the added sugar has been linked with obesity and damage to tooth enamel.

Research has shown that **premature babies have a remarkable reduction in the incidence of disease if they have breast milk.** A 2007 Australian study showed that while formula may contain more nutrients, it lacks breast milk's antibodies and other substances that protect and develop preterm or low-birthweight infants. The result is a lower incidence of respiratory and ear infections, and, with at least four months of exclusive breastfeeding, decreased risk of type 1 diabetes, asthma and eczema.

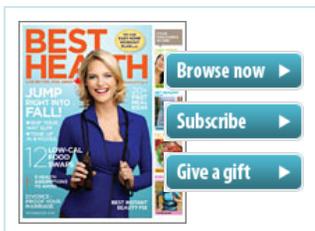
Women who cannot or choose not to breastfeed should talk to their doctor about which formula is best for their baby.

Pictured: Marina Green, Ita Kim and Frances Jones in front of one of the milk bank's freezers, holding some bottles of frozen breast milk. Photo courtesy of BC Women's Milk Bank.

This article was originally titled "Inside Canada's Only Milk Bank" in the January/February

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