The Gift

Breastfeeding after Double Mastectomy and Breast Reconstruction

Rebecca Pockl, RN, BSN, IBCLC, RLC¹

The woman on the other end of the phone asked, “Are you familiar with the Supplemental Nutrition System”? I immediately replied that I was. She explained that she had had a bilateral mastectomy to prevent breast cancer. She had also finally succeeded in getting pregnant and was due in two months. Because she had two healthy children and valued the experience of breastfeeding, she wanted to *simulate* breastfeeding using the Supplemental Nutrition System or SNS. I remember pausing and being silent for a few seconds. I explained that I would support her and I would discuss it with my colleagues and call her back.

Mothers who have had a unilateral mastectomy can still breastfeed. For example, Gorman et al. (2009) described the breast cancer survivors’ experiences with breastfeeding. One woman in her article described breastfeeding by saying, “Oh it’s just that bonding time with your child, you know? They’re right there. You are their sustenance. You’re giving them the food they need to live. It’s just that whole cliché with...just that special close bonding time. That skin-on-skin time. I mean it was wonderful.” Gorman’s article is fabulous, powerful, and very helpful.

For Mary Ellen², the woman I spoke with, breast cancer was not the issue. She had lost several members of her family to breast cancer and had had mastectomies to prevent her from getting it. And now she wanted to breastfeed her new baby as she had with her previous two children.

I was concerned that other staff would not be receptive to her using an SNS. To my surprise, every single staff person embraced the idea. Each one paused, thought briefly, and quickly said, “I don’t see any problem with that. It would be fine.” I called Mary Ellen to say, “Yes, we will be able to do this and all of our staff is on board.”

In late August, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. The birth went just as she wished. Her nurse during labor also happened to be very experienced in working with breastfeeding mothers. While Mary Ellen was recovering, her husband held the baby skin-to-skin. Her first time at the breast, baby Jill licked and nuzzled. Due to the surgical scars, Mary Ellen used a nipple shield to latch Jill to her reconstructed breast. The Suppmenter system was used right away and the baby took to it very well. The mother continued to breastfeed using the SNS three times a day at home.

In a follow up phone call, the mother expressed joy. She said, “The baby nurses three times a day with the system. If I close my eyes, it feels just like it did when I nursed my other children.” She wrote a thank you and said, “No one acted like this system was odd in any way. I felt as normal as any Mom who nurses her new baby. Thank you for this gift. We felt adopted by your staff.”

Our nurses described this experience as follows.

Some people may question why she was so determined to do the SNS...she was so thrilled to feel that old feeling...her other children were teenagers.

Anne Collins RN

It was an amazing experience. It was so important to her, she was glowing, and it made me glow when I left the room. I thanked her for letting us be part of the experience and to teach us. It was so uplifting.

Margaret Speidel RN

The only thing this woman had experienced was losing women in her life. She didn’t want her children to experience that if she could help it. For this Mom, nursing was such a gift. It was a gift for me to work with this patient.

Julie Crosby RN

Mary Ellen came to us more than a year ago, and her experience still moves me. She wanted me to tell the world about her experience so that other mothers who had a bilateral mastectomy, whether they had previously breastfed or not, could experience breastfeeding if they wished. What she may not have fully grasped is that our experience with her family was one of *our* greatest gifts that year.

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2 For the purposes of this article the mother will be referred to as Mary Ellen and the baby as Jill.

Gorman, J., Usita, P.M., MKadlensky, L., & Pierce, J.P. (2009). A qualitative investigation of breast cancer survivors’ experiences with breastfeeding. *Journal of Cancer Survivors*, 3, 181-191.

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