



New Mexico Physicians Applaud Court Decision in Support of Breastfeeding for Incarcerated Women

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Physicians across New Mexico applaud a recent court decision supporting breastfeeding for incarcerated women. Doctors agree that exclusive breastfeeding is the best nutrition for infants because it confers both immediate and long-term benefits, including decreased risk of childhood infections and decreased rates of asthma and type 2 diabetes. “Every major medical organization agrees that breast milk is the best nutrition for babies,” says Dr. Emilie Sebesta, the co-medical director of the Mother Baby Unit at the University of New Mexico Hospital.

The case centered on whether Monique Hidalgo, an inmate at the New Mexico Department of Corrections, had a constitutional right to breastfeed. She was incarcerated on non-violent drug charges and parole violations, and received medication assisted therapy for opiate use disorder through the UNM Milagro Perinatal Substance Abuse Clinic. Her child developed neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), a constellation of opioid withdrawal symptoms that includes difficulty feeding, irritability, and if left untreated, seizures. Her baby’s medical team felt that breastfeeding was a critical part of her treatment. Recent data demonstrates that breastfeeding decreases the severity and length of stay of neonatal abstinence syndrome.

Ms. Hidalgo participated in a pilot program that supported breastfeeding for incarcerated women, but the Department of Corrections revoked her rights when a urine drug screen was positive for medications she received during her hospitalization. In their letter, doctors emphasized that the small amount of methadone or buprenorphine found in breastmilk is not harmful for infants; indeed breastfeeding is especially critical for these at-risk infants. Dr. Hannah Watson, a fellow at the Milagro

program explained "Breastfeeding is good medicine for moms and babies, especially for infants with neonatal withdrawal syndrome."

Physicians identified allowing buprenorphine maintenance therapy in corrections facilities, increased funding for substance abuse treatment, and alternative sentencing for drug-related offenses as other important legislative and advocacy priorities for the state.

Dr. Larry Leeman, Medical Director of the Milagro program, concluded, "How to treat incarcerated pregnant women with substance use disorders is a growing issue in our state with significant associated costs and potential adverse events for both mothers and children. Breastfeeding is a critical part of the medical treatment for these high-risk infants, but it's not enough alone. We hope that a lactation policy for incarcerated women is a small part of a more comprehensive plan to address substance abuse for families statewide." Dr Larry Leeman M.D. can be reached at (505) 410 6990 and Dr Emilie Sebesta at (505) 385 5694 for additional information.

The New Mexico Chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Academy of Family Physicians support the right of incarcerated women to breastfeed their infants during visitation and have access to electric breast pumps to maintain their milk supply while they are separated from their children.



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