

# The Southern Philippines Medical Center Human Milk Bank

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Republic Act (RA) 7600, or “The Rooming-In and Breast-feeding Act of 1992,” establishes standards on safe breastfeeding practices for the benefit of mothers and infants. The law briefly mentions the human milk bank (HMB) as a facility for breastmilk collection and storage.<sup>1</sup> Department of Health (DOH) Administrative Order 2007-0026 on the “Revitalization of the Mother-Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative in Health Facilities with Maternity and Newborn Care Services” supports this law by promoting exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life.<sup>1</sup>

RA 10028, or the “Expanded Breast-feeding Promotion Act of 2009,” elaborates on the establishment of human milk banks in medical centers, regional hospitals, and other health facilities to temporarily provide breastmilk to infants who are separated from their mothers due to critical illness, emergencies, and/or disasters.<sup>2</sup>

The implementation of milk storage and milk banking in health institutions is elaborated in the DOH Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) for RA 10028.<sup>2</sup> According to the IRR, health institutions are required to set up milk storage facilities for collecting and storing milk among mothers separated from their infants due to medical reasons. Milk storage facilities are different from the lactation stations designated for breastfeeding employees. Moreover, health institutions are encouraged to establish their own milk banks.<sup>2</sup>

Up until three years ago, the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of Southern Philippines Medical Center (SPMC) served as the storage facility for breastmilk donated by mothers of admitted neonates and lactating mothers from the community. With very few donors at that time, the breastmilk supply could not completely meet the demands of the NICU. It then became increasingly apparent that the hospital needed organized procedures for the active collection, processing, storing, and dispensing of breastmilk, which will be carried out by a full complement of trained staff using standard HMB equipment.

In compliance with RA 10028, the SPMC established the first Human Milk Bank

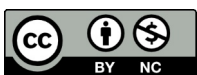
(HMB) in Davao Region in 2018. Dr. Melanie B. Adolfo, a neonatologist and the Head of the HMB, alongside Ms. Nicky Jane P. Salas, a nurse and the HMB Coordinator, attended a training on human milk banking early in 2018. They facilitated the inauguration of the milk bank on December 17, 2018 with the help of Mr. Franklin P. Malavi, the officer-in-charge HMB coordinator at that time.

At present, Dr Adolfo and Ms Salas work with two midwives and one nursing attendant to keep the SPMC HMB in full operation. The NICU continues to store breastmilk for the immediate consumption of neonates admitted to the unit, but the breastmilk that the unit receives is now regularly endorsed to the HMB for processing before storage.

As a member of the Human Milk Bank Association of the Philippines (HBMAP), the SPMC HMB commits to pursue the mission of the association “to ensure that every infant in need will have access to safe human milk.”<sup>3</sup> Apart from carrying out the tasks involved in receiving, processing, storing, and dispensing human milk, the SPMC HMB also aims to provide support, training, education, and reinforcement of breastfeeding advocacy to mothers and health care professionals.<sup>4</sup>

The HMB currently sources its breastmilk supply from screened donors who are either postpartum patients admitted in SPMC (in-house collection), or breastfeeding advocates who voluntarily commit to donate breastmilk during their first six months postpartum (community collection). The HMB coordinator screens potential donors for eligibility to donate breastmilk by reviewing the mothers’ answers in the donor screening forms and their antenatal laboratory results, and by doing personal interviews with the mothers for data verification.

When the HMB’s breastmilk collection from admitted mothers decreased during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the milk bank started to actively collect breastmilk donations from the community. Since April 2020, donated breastmilk from the community is collected at least once a week by the HMB Coordinator with the help of the SPMC Engineering and Facilities Manage-



ment for transportation. LATCH (Lactation, Attachment, Training, Counseling, Help) Davao, a non-governmental organization that advocates breastfeeding, has been participating in the HMB efforts to encourage qualified mothers in the community to become donors and has been helping in the delivery of collected breastmilk donations from the community to SPMC.

The HMB coordinator receives breastmilk donations three to four times a week either through in-house collection or through scheduled pick-up from donors in the community. In-house collection is facilitated by at least one HMB staff. In-house donors use a manual or battery-operated breast pump provided by SPMC HMB. Breastmilk donations from the community are individually expressed and temporarily stored by donor mothers before the milk is turned over to the HMB coordinator during scheduled pick-up. All breastmilk donations received during the day are pooled, divided into 250-ml aliquots using polypropylene bottles, and subsequently pasteurized. The bottles of pasteurized breastmilk are properly labeled with their batch numbers, pasteurization dates, freezing dates, and use-before dates. Processed breastmilk is either directly dispensed to the requesting unit or stored at -20°C for up to 12 months.

Currently, the SPMC HMB prioritizes the provision of processed breastmilk to sick, premature, low-birth-weight, and post-operative newborns admitted at the SPMC NICU and Pediatric Intensive Care Units (PICU) whose mothers are unable to provide contact breastfeeding.

The HMB staff provide breastfeeding education to admitted postpartum mothers and their families especially during in-house breastmilk collection. They also issue certificates to regular donors in the community and give recognition awards to top community donors of the month. LATCH Davao has also been helping the HMB in providing breastfeeding motivation and lactation education through peer counseling and information videos.

The SPMC HMB is located at the third level (CBI-2) of the Institute for Women and

Newborn Health (IWNH). The facility is equipped with two laminar flow cabinets, one laboratory incubator, one 9-liter- and one 12-liter-capacity pasteurizers, one hospital-grade freezer, two household freezers, and three hospital-grade refrigerators. SPMC HMB complies with the basic structural and procedural requirements for human milk banking set by the HBMAP.<sup>3</sup> As of the last quarter of 2021, the SPMC HMB received a total of 240,335 cc of breastmilk from 394 donors and dispensed a total of 294,300 cc of breastmilk to 1,554 recipients. The total breastmilk dispensed was only 68.11% of the total breastmilk prescribed (432,112 cc) for the recipients during that same quarter.

Future plans for the improvement of the SPMC HMB include adding a laboratory technologist to the HMB staff. The laboratory professional can calibrate, operate, and maintain the equipment used for standard microbiology processes in the HMB. There are also plans to widen the donor base of SPMC HMB. This can be done through raising public awareness on the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, introducing the advocacy to more women early during their pregnancy, and connecting with NGOs and LGU health workers to draw in more donors from the community. These efforts will not only increase the breastmilk supply to the milk bank—and thereby benefit more recipients—but also contribute to the general efforts towards exclusive breastfeeding in the community, in general. With more breastmilk supply from additional donors, the SPMC HMB can expand the recipients of processed breastmilk to include infants admitted outside of the NICU and PICU, and in other hospitals—or even non-admitted infants in the community—who are in need of breastmilk.

The SPMC HMB has barely started operating, yet it has grown over time to deliver very important health services to mothers and infants in SPMC. At this pace of development, and with the active participation of its stakeholders, the SPMC HMB will be well on its way to realizing its noble purpose of providing safe human milk to infants in need.

#### Contributors

MBA and NJPS contributed to the conceptualization of this article. All authors wrote the original draft, performed the subsequent revisions, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of this report.

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**Competing interests**

None declared

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