Women's Magazines Provide Mixed Messages About Breastfeeding

New parents often hear that "breast is best" when it comes to feeding babies, and the media seem to agree—in theory. But despite the fact that magazine articles encourage women to breastfeed, they tend to focus on its barriers rather than its benefits, according to a study conducted by several University of Iowa researchers.

Leah Frerichs earned her MS degree in Community and Behavioral Health from the University of Iowa College of Public Health in 2005. She recently collaborated with Julie Andsager, associate professor of journalism and mass communication, in the UI College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, to conduct "Framing Breastfeeding and Formula-feeding Messages in Popular U.S. Magazines," a study examining breastfeeding information in women's magazines.

Because so many pregnant women use magazines as a source of health information, the medium may have an impact on breastfeeding rates, Andsager said. The researchers found that specialized magazines, such as Parents and American Baby, are much more useful sources of breastfeeding information than general women's magazines.

However, even these types of magazines present mixed messages, telling their readers that breastfeeding is the best option but focusing on the problems women face when making the decision to breastfeed. Anxiety about physical problems, like pain or inability to produce enough milk, and social factors, such as the embarrassment to breastfeed around others, were among the most prevalent problems mentioned.

"In terms of social barriers, our society tends to be squeamish at the sight of a woman breastfeeding in public," Andsager said. "The magazine articles did not offer solutions to these problems."

The study analyzed the content of seven popular magazines within three genres (women's general interest, parenting, and African-American) for portrayals of infant feeding. Researchers analyzed 617 articles from the magazines, all of which were published between 1997 and 2003, for content including barriers to, benefits of and advice for breastfeeding and formula feeding. The articles were also analyzed for prevalence of information regarding partner and social support of breastfeeding and images of breastfeeding or bottle-feeding.

Overall, the magazines studied provided more information on breastfeeding than formula feeding. Messages were focused on individualized breastfeeding barriers and advice; seldom covered social and environmental issues; and placed much of the responsibility of infant feeding on the mother, while the role of social and partner support was diminished. Bottle-feeding images were nearly as common as breastfeeding images.

"Although magazines present breastfeeding as a positive thing, images accompanying
breastfeeding articles tend to show bottle-fed babies, which may suggest to casual readers that bottle-feeding is the norm," Andsager said. "Bottles may contain breast milk, but bottles are culturally tied to formula feeding. Further, the images most frequently depict a woman feeding her baby alone, which removes the father or partner from this bonding experience."

The researchers suggest that more images of fathers or partners could help to illustrate ways they could be involved, and that more extensive coverage of issues surrounding breastfeeding in public could reshape women's attitudes regarding the normalcy of breastfeeding in public.

The authors concluded that, as research continues to provide evidence of breastfeeding health benefits, magazine readers need to be presented information that will give them a more accurate and complete view of breastfeeding while balancing infant-feeding choices with individual and social concerns.

Additional UI researchers who contributed to the study include Shelly Campo, assistant professor of community and behavioral health; Mary Aquilino, associate professor of community and behavioral health; and Carolyn Stewart Dyer, professor of journalism and mass communication. The study was published in the journal Women & Health.