

Rowan's Milk, A story of milk donation after infant loss

By Laurinda R.

When I lost my daughter Rowan, she was full term and my second child, so I knew that my milk was likely to come in within a few days. The hospital gave me no lactation education. I specifically asked when it became clear that the nurse was done giving me my “check out” information without mentioning lactation. What little information she gave me was outdated and unhelpful.

As soon as I came home from the hospital, my dear friend and [La Leche League](#) Leader, Melissa Cole, from [Luna Lactation](#), came to my home with herb teas and tinctures--[sage and peppermint](#) to help dry up my milk and motherwort to help with the hormonal and emotional changes I would be experiencing. When my midwives asked how I felt about my milk coming in, I thought it would be easier on my already raw emotions if it did not.

My body had other ideas. This was my second child and my breasts remembered what to do. In spite of drinking tons of iced peppermint tea with plenty of sage and motherwort, my milk came in on day three. By that night my breasts were achy and hard. I called Melissa to help me figure out what to do next. She suggested that I pump off just enough to feel comfortable so I would not increase the milk production, and take ibuprofen for the pain. I used icepacks and cabbage leaves to help make me more comfortable, but the milk just kept increasing. My heart ached as I woke every two hours with breast engorged with milk and no baby to drink it.

By three a.m. I found myself emailing Melissa to ask about donating my milk. She had mentioned that possibility and I had already pumped 9 oz in less than five hours. I did not think that a [Milk Bank](#) would take my milk because of my allergy medications, but several of my friends had been involved with direct [mother to mother donation](#). Another friend, who gave me a great deal of support through this difficult time, had two adopted sons, and she told me how appreciative she had been for any breast milk she could get for her babies. I realized my milk was going to come in whether I wanted it or not. So I made the decision to pump as long as I needed to and find someone who could use it rather than suffer trying to suppress or dry up the milk.

My sister had a four-month-old baby herself. She had some of her milk stored in our freezer, and when I saw the difference in the color of our milk I knew mine was the “Liquid Gold” they talk about. I wanted to donate it to a newborn who needed the extra nutrients and immunities. As it turned out, I found a friend of a friend who had an adopted seven- week-old baby boy by the same name as my daughter, Rowan. I knew then it was meant to be. I came to love the idea that my baby’s milk could help another baby thrive. I could even write on the freezer bags “Rowan’s Milk” as I had wanted to, and not worry that it would make the recipient mother too sad.

Over the next five or six weeks, I was able to donate about 450oz of milk to “the other Rowan.” My friend Lauren, who was a part of the [Oregon Nursing Mother’s Counsel](#), helped me buy a new [Medela Pump In Style Advanced](#) at a discount when it became clear that my ancient pump was not up to the challenge of exclusive pumping. My sister was returning to work in a month,

so she was able to use it when I weaned off pumping. Any time I felt full or uncomfortable, I pumped until empty and froze the milk. But as soon as I spaced out my pumping and pumped a little less each day, I was able to wean very quickly without any engorgement or discomfort. I am sure I could have weaned sooner, but I hesitated to give up that one last physical connection to my sweet baby and wanted to give as much milk as I could.

Melissa never stayed long when she visited as she had a newborn herself. Our babies were due only five weeks apart so she did not want to bring her to see me. But I do not know how I would have gotten through those first few weeks after losing Rowan without her expertise and support. I am still infuriated that the hospital allowed me to leave without seeing a lactation consultant or even mentioning that my milk would come in. Most women do not have the resources I do, and I hope to expand the Remembering Rowan Project to find ways to provide resources to those mothers who need them.

I have talked to many other mothers in the past two years and learned that after miscarriage or even an abortion some women may lactate, but no one ever warned them. A friend who lost her baby to SIDS spoke of crying in the shower as her milk went down the drain until a friend finally called a lactation consultant to help her. Sadly, it is not only the mothers who lack this information, but most of the Lactation Consultants, Breastfeeding Educators, and Doulas I have talked to do not know much about how to help their clients who have lost a baby.

When you lose a baby you suddenly discover you are a part of a secret club. Many people do not talk about their experiences until another mother has lost her baby. However, the fact that most women will lactate after losing a baby, even early in pregnancy, is the even bigger secret. Once you have lost your baby, you are given lots of resources on how to deal with the emotional grief but no one warns you about the physical grief. [Pat Schweibert](#)'s book, [When Hello Means Goodbye](#), given out in many hospitals, says it well, "My body had its own grief. And its tears were white."

My New [Rowan's Milk Blog](#) and [Survey](#)

As a result of my own experience, I am working toward improving Lactation Education for mothers who experience a loss. I have put together a survey for mothers' experiences with lactation after a loss in an effort to show what is needed and improve the resources available to those mothers. If you have experienced a loss at any stage of pregnancy or during the first year, please follow the link to participate in my brief survey. With your help, we can get the information out in the open so other grieving mothers are not taken by surprise and can get the lactation support they need.