



Cherise Vane

February 11, 2007

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
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Canberra ACT 2600

I am a mother to two boys, an engineer who works part time and a breastfeeding counsellor with the Australian Breastfeeding Association. I spend one to two hours a week helping local mums with breastfeeding problems as well as a 12 hour shift once every two months on the Association's Queensland Helpline.

During the three years I have been a counsellor I have heard some horror stories from the mothers I counsel. A close friend was told if she didn't give her baby formula she would cause the baby to be brain damaged. I have counseled countless mothers who have such a lack of confidence in their own ability to breastfeed their babies because they have lack of support and a continual undermining of their efforts. Much of this advice comes from health professionals, either in hospital shortly after birth, or in subsequent visits on returning home. Many mothers still believe that formula is almost as good as breastmilk, and such attitudes are not helped by toddler formulas now being aggressively marketed as healthy for the 12 month plus age group. On the other hand, I have seen many mums and babies flourish in a 'breastfeeding friendly' environment at ABA meetings, where breastfeeding is seen as normal.

It is a well known fact that breastfeeding produces a much healthier child, therefore decreasing the drain on the health system. I don't think the general public are at all aware just how much healthier the baby is. In Australia there are 20,000 hospital admissions a year for acute gastroenteritis in children under five years old (Medical Journal of Australia 2002 177 (3): 128-129). Imagine how drastically this number would be reduced with an increase in breastfeeding rates and increase in extended breastfeeding (beyond 12 months). Breastfeeding is an activity where the baby sets what it wants to 'eat' and then feeds until it is full. I feel this has a huge impact on the child's eating habits – only eating until satisfied. When a baby is fed artificially, it has to swallow the formula or risk drowning/choking. It also consumes all those excess calories because it is not the perfect food like breastmilk is. The adult sets the food intake in formula fed children, not the child itself. Perhaps this sets them up for a lifetime of overeating?

Obesity is such a huge issue in our children. While the effect of breastfeeding on childhood obesity may be a contentious issue to some, recent studies have shown a decreased chance of obesity in breastfed children, with those who are breastfed longer having an even lower incidence of becoming obese. I have discussed only two of the positive health outcomes. There are many more.

The impact of breastmilk substitutes is still high in Australia. Child health nurses are given samples of formula, and do give these out to mothers. I know as I was offered some when I visited with my first baby. Some health nurses are sponsored/trained by formula manufacturers. I disagree with the ability of formula manufacturers to have their own websites with forums for mothers. At Wyeth Nutrition they state that “you can be reassured that your formula fed baby is being given **an excellent** start in life.” These are words directly from their own website. I think this is a very misleading thing to say. To state that using their formula gives your baby an excellent start is simply untrue. I dislike how their toddler formula is labeled ‘Step 3’ as if there are two steps that must come before it. It is a subtle but powerful way to advertise, and I think it undermines the fact that breastfeeding is normal and it is normal to continue beyond 12 months. On Nestle’s website it states “human milk and infant formula have all the nutrients your baby needs for the first 6 months.” It lumps the two kinds of feeding together, leading the reader to believe that they are on equal footing. Both Wyeth and Nestle emphasise the importance of a good and well-balanced diet during breastfeeding. This insinuates that if a mum lives on a poor diet they cannot breastfeed. Again it undermines a mother’s ability by suggesting they can breastfeed, but only if they lead a healthy lifestyle. We all know of the hundreds and thousands of mothers in Third World Countries who breastfeed successfully on a very poor diet (by Western standards). I think infant formula manufacturers should not be allowed to make such claims and comments.

To encourage breastfeeding we need to do the following:

- ‘out’ the dangers of infant formula in a national campaign, undertaken by the government and not the Australian Breastfeeding Association. I think in some respects the Association can seem a little on a fringe (Nipple Nazis gets bandied around some circles I have been in). Any advertising campaign needs to come from the government.
- Educate health professionals. Many cause harm rather than assist mothers. Each hospital needs at least one certified lactation consultant who is also available for home visits in the first few weeks of the baby’s life.
- A public health campaign showing the norms of breastfeeding – frequent feeds, feeding in public. Avoid using the term ‘benefits of breastfeeding.’ Breastfeeding produces normal healthy children.
- Human milk banks in every State.
- Labeling of all baby food from 6 months, rather than 4 months.
- Support for women returning to work. Some employers will allow workers to smoke during breaks but will not provide a clean and private place to express breastmilk. Employees should be provided with lactation breaks to either breastfeed their baby or express milk for their absent baby.

The current measures to promote breastfeeding are ineffective. The percentage of women attempting breastfeeding is actually quite high. Something horrendous seems to happen to many mums in hospital whereupon on discharge the number still breastfeeding has dropped. Mums are given such mixed messages in hospital that you don't know who to believe. After leaving hospital, unless the mother contacts the Australian Breastfeeding Association, there is very little support. It seems unless you know where to seek help, you are helpless. Some mums are out of hospital without having established breastfeeding and then left to fend for themselves. These are the most difficult mums to counsel over the phone – those with a two day old baby crying in the background and the mum crying over the phone as she tries to figure out just how to feed the baby. It shouldn't be like this. Many mums say they feel pressured to breastfeed but there is little support and guidance as to how to continue. The only way I made it through the early days of breastfeeding was by contacting Nursing Mothers (now Australian Breastfeeding Association). It was only through their help, support and suggestions that I breastfed my eldest for 13 months and my youngest for 22 months. I felt like the Association was a shining light in the middle of all the confusion and half truths.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Sincerely,
Cherise Vane