

Submission - INQUIRY INTO BREASTFEEDING

Submission no. 93
 AUTHORISED: 21/03/07



To The Committee,

This submission for the Inquiry Into Breastfeeding is written from two perspectives; that of a mother who has successfully breastfed two children past the age of two years, and as a Community Educator for the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA), living in a remote part of the Northern Territory.

I will outline the issues and problems I have encountered in 10 years of Antenatal Education (and as a mother) and submit my recommendations for initiatives that the Federal Government (and indeed State Governments) can undertake to improve the situation.

Firstly, there are several "reasons" why mothers are weaning their children from the breast prematurely (this information comes from surveys conducted by ABA and Lismore Base Hospital, NSW and from the responses/comments I have heard as a mother);

1) Myths and misinformation about "how" to breastfeed, "comp" feeding with formula and weaning abound in the community. This is despite the best efforts of ABA for over 40 years. Some of this is from friends/relatives etc and some from health professionals that a mother has gone to for support.

2) Pressure/lack of support from general public (as well as people mentioned above) to stop breastfeeding when a baby is only a few months old. I was constantly berated by family members and strangers "Are you STILL feeding that baby?". I was even told by another mother in a feeding room at a shopping centre "That's disgusting!" when my son was only 9 months of age; yet the World Health Organisation recommends EXCLUSIVE breastfeeding for the first 6 months and continue breastfeeding into the 2nd year at least. A MASSIVE latitudinal and longitudinal study in Britain found that the LONGER a mother breastfed for the lower the incidence of breast, cervical and ovarian cancer as well as osteoporosis. With all the Breast Cancer awareness and research dollars, why does breastfeeding NEVER even receive a MENTION in the media? The general understanding that breast milk is "best" for babies is there but it is being undermined by negative attitudes and responses.

3) Promotion of artificial feed (formula) is allowed at a retail level and through agencies that mothers go to for support (eg health clinics). This leads to the mistaken belief that formula is "close" to breast milk and the dangers of even 1 bottle of formula predisposing infants to Type 1 diabetes, asthma, eczema and allergies is NOT widely known.

My suggestions for ways to improve this situation are:

1) Educate Health Professionals; this could be a compulsory part of their training at Tertiary Institutions and followed by in-servicing during their working life (the BFHI accreditation process would be ideal) to ensure they are up to date with information and knowledge of support agencies for referring mothers.

2) Human Milk Banks. Babies are regularly given artificial feeds because of premature birth, birth complications and maternal illness. These already "at risk" babies should be able to have access to human milk until (with support) maternal breastfeeding is established.

3) Educate the general community in supporting breastfeeding and breastfeeding women as SAVING the Public Health dollars and being vital for the future health of Australia (especially as part of a campaign to combat obesity and breast cancer)

4) LEGISLATIVE protection against "insidious" marketing of artificial feeds at RETAIL level and follow WHO recommendations with regards to labelling on infant foods; especially for foods (on supermarket shelves now) that read "suitable from 4 months".

5) Resource ABA to be part of National education program. I was involved in the ABA working group on Breastfeeding Education (we have developed a national standardised program for Antenatal Education)and this could be extended to support Breastfeeding education at Preschools, Primary and High Schools (as part of HEALTH education/ Maturation) as well as Early Childhood Clinics and Hospitals. If this "directive" came from a Government level rather than relying on a volunteer organisation to promote itself, it will immediately raise its importance and acceptance. This would require you to consider costs saved to the Public Health System in the medium to long-term against supporting a volunteer organisation now.

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To sum up, I believe there are major impediments, at present, against mothers breastfeeding past a few months of their babies lives. These have costs in health of the individual and the community . By changing some seemingly small things; such as the LANGUAGE we use.... Say ARTIFICIAL FEED rather than infant and toddler formula (doesn't sound like much, but it instantly gives the impression of being "scientific" and therefore correct/positive, as opposed to "artificial" which has negative connotations). We can then progress to implementing strategies which require more effort and organisation, eg a milk bank and education system. I would emphasise at this point that all of these suggestions are not only possible but some are already occurring (eg Antenatal and Health Professional Education: I have been involved in both at a local level) and require the support and recognition from government to develop further.

I would welcome further discussion with you as both a mother and as a Community Educator for ABA. I am concerned that submissions from ABA members will be given less credibility as being from a "tea and scones" organisation or seen as agitators etc; all I can say is that ABA supported me (on MANY occasions) when I was breastfeeding , and I would not have breastfed as successfully without them; which is why I decided to do my bit and carry it on. My suggestion to the committee is that you have a willing and organised "resource" in ABA that requires only a little support to reinvigorate and support breastfeeding in Australia. Finally, I would recommend that the committee contact (maybe even subscribe?) to the LRC; Lactation Resource Centre which is a resource for government, health professionals and individuals. Every paper, article and study concerning breastfeeding is contained within their Library and they have study modules and search facilities to increase your knowledge on ANYTHING to do with Breastfeeding.

I sincerely hope this has been of some small assistance and look forward to seeing the results of your endeavours.

Yours Faithfully,
Jan Greentree