

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

25th February 2007

Re: Inquiry into Breastfeeding

Dear Sir / Madam

As a recent mother of a wonderful 7 month old daughter, I have been made aware of your inquiry and feel that my experience is worthy of comment.

When I went into spontaneous labour at 34 weeks and my daughter was born 6 weeks premature, I was told that my baby would be fed immediately on infant formula. This was literally 2 minutes after delivery and not knowing anything about what was needed or 'normal' and still being in shock; I just nodded and went with what I was told.

The next morning when I visited her in the nursery, there were a range of midwives who showed me around and told me her feed times, who was looking after her, the protocol of how the nursery worked with visitors, changing bedding, nappies etc, but at no stage did anyone stop me and say "Breastfeeding is going to keep you baby alive - so get expressing!". I was completely unaware of the situation, only being at work the day prior and always imagining a situation where I would breast feed and take my baby home immediately. Here I was in a nursery, looking at my little baby at 2.1kg with a tube in her nose to be fed infant formula - why or how I wasn't told and I wasn't sure... to be honest, I didn't even think about it... it was just what was happening at the time.

My second night in hospital, while my daughter was in the nursery and I was away from her in my room, I couldn't sleep so wandered the corridors to find some literature about premature babies. What I found was some pamphlets from the Australian Breastfeeding Association that went on about the importance of breast milk for my baby and how critical it was ... even if it was only 5ml of milk, it was critical for her growth, development and getting her home faster! That night I sat there for a good hour to manually express 14ml - I was so excited to be able to provide this for my baby.

Reflecting on the whole experience now, I am amazed that it was up to me to find out this information on my own... why was this not the first thing that happened? A health professional or midwife should be immediately allocated to a woman in this situation (premature labour) to explain exactly what is happening and that breast milk is going to be

the most important thing right now and what to do. Once I had the information, I could ask questions and I was certainly assisted with technique, equipment etc, but why on earth did it take up to 3 days for me to find out myself that my breast milk was crucial to (a) my baby's ultimate survival and (b) for me to be able to leave the hospital with her!

When I was told my baby would not be leaving until she was on a minimum of '3 suck feeds' a day with the others administered through her gavage tube – I was on a mission and was able to take her home after 2 weeks on an early release program. As soon as she was home and being fully fed breast milk, her weight increased dramatically. Initially I was told it was likely to be six weeks, but due to my own research and determination with expressing, reading up on all the benefits and days spent at the nursery attempting feeds and breastfeeding techniques with the midwives, we were able to go home.

My experience tells me that:

1. The health benefits are incredible for a baby, especially a premie who had to put on weight quickly. As soon as she was completely off the formula and was fully breastfed, her weight increased dramatically.
2. Healthcare professionals should not 'assume' that new mothers know what to do and the benefits of breast milk and feeding
3. The bonding element or what I discovered was called "Kangaroo Care" with a premie and breastfeeding was essential for me to feel I was connecting as a mother with my new baby even though we weren't together 24/7
4. The sooner you breastfeed a premie, the sooner they put on weight, the sooner you can go home (which is what every mother wanted in that unit)
5. The staff were clearly happy to administer formula until the mother initiated the breast milk. No one said or clearly was too scared to say are you expressing? How much? How often? I had to source and read my own information and then tell the staff what I wanted.

Overall, the information was available, but it was up to me to find it. I think if health professionals were more upfront about discussing the issues and providing the information, it would make things a lot easier for women to make an informed choice. I was obviously very frustrated and upset when I discovered on my own how important breast milk and breastfeeding was for my baby. I know given this information upfront I would have been on the case a lot sooner about providing her with essential breast milk and feeding that got us home sooner, allowed her to gain weight quicker and established our bond as mother and daughter.

Nicole Edwards