

Submission to the House Standing Committee on Health and Ageing – Inquiry into Breastfeeding.

My name is Lisa Nielsen and I am a member of an ever-shrinking percentage of breastfeeding mothers now my daughter is 16 months. I am a former donor and volunteer on the executive of the Mothers Milk Bank. I have also trained as a Community Educator with the Australian Breastfeeding Association.

I'd like to share with you my personal history as a mother and my journey to the Mothers Milk Bank and Australian Breastfeeding Association as a volunteer.

My background is as a teacher. I am a believer in life-long learning and being proactive in my own education, but two years ago I was oblivious of the significance of breastfeeding and the health dangers of artificial baby milks. I was pregnant with my first child and my initial medical advice came from my GP. When asked for a referral to the best hospital available, the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative was not mentioned, so I chose the hospital closest to my work. Had I been fully informed, my choice would have been different and based on that issue.

Part of being proactive about my pregnancy meant that I wanted to find out about breastfeeding. I knew it was considered a good thing to do for my baby, but figured I'd see how it went, as a lot of the information I initially read and was told, consisted of the warning 'not all women can' and that formula was an equally appropriate way to feed if 'it doesn't work out'.

I went to baby expos and presentations, received Bounty Bags and lots of freebie samples for the baby. I had sachets of artificial baby milks and toddler milks (which I had no idea was actually 'different' from formula and assumed was important, why else would they be giving it out?) and several brands of dummies ranging from new born to 9 months+. I put all of these products safely away ready for use when needed.

After subscribing to the Australian Breastfeeding Association, I learnt about their Breastfeeding Education Classes. I wanted to go as I was too impatient to wait until we could get into the hospital's antenatal classes. It was then a shock to discover that the only Breastfeeding Education Classes available to Gold Coast mothers were in Brisbane, and run by volunteers. My husband Rob is a great support and on the promise of a weekend filled with breasts, agreed to sign up with me. It was to become a significant choice for us.

Later, at my hospital antenatal class, as we began our ½ hour on breastfeeding, I told the presenting midwife about the education classes I'd taken. She actually checked with me during and afterwards as to whether her information was the same as the ABA's and if I needed to add anything she'd missed!

My journey to the Mothers Milk Bank began with the birth of my daughter Isabel on the 29th November, 2005. Isabel was born prematurely at just under 33 weeks gestation. Initially she was tube fed and topped up with formula (while my husband syringed droplets of colostrum from me for her). She was unable to

pass her meconium until she was fed pure breastmilk on day 3. I have since discovered that had I been able to access donor milk, it would have lessened the risk of necrotising enterocolitis (NEC). The risk of NEC is 6 times greater for formula fed babies than those just fed breastmilk. Thankfully not an issue I had to deal with, but one that is of clear importance to all the parents of premature and low birth weight babies.

Once my milk came in, I had an abundance of supply. I had to limit my pumping to around 3 mins every 4 hours or so and I was still producing 240mls from both breasts each time. The freezer in the SCN quickly filled, and so did my freezer at home. It was heart-breaking when it was suggested that I might need to consider tipping the excess down the sink. I couldn't do it and gave it to my dog instead!

It was around this time that a midwife mentioned how I could possibly donate to the new Mothers Milk Bank being set up by Marea Ryan and Jenny Jones down at John Flynn. I went online to www.mothersmilkbank.com.au and registered. It's really easy, and I ask that all of you, if you get nothing else from this, find the motivation to go online and register your interest.

I have learnt, through my membership with the Australian Breastfeeding Association, so much about the importance of breastmilk for babies. This has really cemented my belief in the importance of Australian parents and babies being able to access donor milk when it is needed, and translated into my becoming both a donor and now a volunteer with the Mothers Milk Bank and the Australian Breastfeeding Association. What an interesting way to find a passion in my life!

During my 16 months of motherhood, I have heard many stories from mothers who 'couldn't breastfeed' or 'had to wean because of low supply', many of whom have felt cheated once they realised that the medical professionals who gave them this advice have not been up-to-date, or downright incorrect in their breastfeeding management advice. Dummy sucking, timed feeding, topping up with formula and non-breastfeeding friendly medications are all commonly advised by medical professionals amongst my circle of new mothers. Due to a combination of this advice, I have had a friend in tears of desperation call me in the middle of the night. She had followed medical advice to use a dummy to prevent reflux and to time feeds out to 3 to 4 hourly. This had led to low supply and medical advice to top up with formula. She used my expressed breastmilk as a mother-to-mother donation as she was so fearful of feeding her baby artificial milk and had lost confidence in obtaining further medical advice.

I'd like to make some specific comments on the terms of reference:

b.evaluate the impact of marketing of breast milk substitutes on breastfeeding rates and, in particular, in disadvantaged, Indigenous and remote communities.

The MAIF code is voluntary and for manufacturers only. This is not enough to prevent a negative marketing impact of artificial baby milks on breastfeeding rates. I have personally seen supermarkets and chemists displaying and promoting sales of artificial baby milks, both on shelf and on end stacks. I was

offered free formula sachets by a local chemist for no other reason than that I had a baby with me. I have seen a 'health nurse' in another chemist reach into a large formula company branded bag to pass on formula samples to another mother, again without even a direct request for this.

In terms of remote communities being supported by the MothersMilkBanks, I would suggest that a lot of the babies in need of donated breastmilk, as they are sick or premature, (and mum is under a lot of stress or having to express) would be moved to large hospitals and so able to access the milk bank while there, as well as the mother being able to access our Lactation Consultant for support to establish her own breastmilk supply.

I would also like to address the question of whether or not breastmilk should be regarded as a food or tissue. Apart from the fact that it is identified as a food internationally and federally, in Queensland, the tissue banking is sponsored by Wyeth. As manufacturers of artificial baby milks, this puts them in a direct conflict of interest with the MothersMilkBank.

d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding.

The Federal and State governments need to support the normalisation of breastfeeding through advertising and financial support for education. Informing parents as to the disadvantages of artificial baby milks is important to encouraging breastfeeding. I like to use the analogy that just as we are told to prepare for the marriage, not just the wedding, so too is the need to promote and focus on feeding and parenting our children, not just on the birth.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that we, as a first world country, should have the right to access the most appropriate food source for our babies. Human milk, whether given by the mother or from a donor milk bank, should be the standard we aspire to for all Australian babies.