

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

23rd February 2007

Re: Inquiry into Breastfeeding

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am a mother of 3 beautiful breastfed children, an aunt to a successfully breastfed premature infant and a friend "Aunty" to many other children nurtured by breast milk. I also happen to be a health professional working in Community Health. I would like to present my views and experience with regards to breastfeeding over the past five years.

a. the extent of the health benefits of breastfeeding;

As a general statement I have been thoroughly amazed at the lack of passion health professionals in child and maternal health have towards breastfeeding. Health workers appear too scared to advocate "Breast is Best" and whatever the mother wants / chooses is best, "as it is not my place to say". Whilst I agree we need to respect a mother's / family's opinion about how they choose to feed an infant, I truly do not feel that families are fully informed about the benefits and the disadvantages (of not) breastfeeding a child.

After breastfeeding my children and seeing how they thrive I have formed a strong opinion about the health benefits of breast milk and breastfeeding, some examples of my unexpected personal discoveries include:

- Breast milk is fantastic at clearing up infant conjunctivitis (a squirt in the eye rather than antibiotic drops)
- My son in his first 18 months at childcare (he was aged 6mths – 2years) had less than 5 days absent due to illness, he was breastfed whilst attending and the immune boosting capacity of breast milk was highly significant especially compared to other children's absentee rate
- Breast milk is a great healer, squirt it on a scratch, mosquito bite and it fights infection and speeds recovery, great for hormonal mother pimples after birth
- Breastfeeding burns a whopping amount of calories – the Boob Diet! "Burn calories while watching Jamie Durie on Dancing with the Stars".

d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding;

Most of the information I received about the benefits of breastfeeding was from a no-government organisation in Darwin, The Childbirth Education Association (CEA), through prenatal stretching classes and their monthly newsletter and their passionate childbirth educators. Most of the support I received was from my breastfeeding mother friends at playgroups, CEA newsletters and CEA gatherings. I would like to see more financial support of non-government organisations such as the CEA in the community. I would like to see community health expand into visiting playgroups with lactation consultants as guest speakers. The publication of newsletters to new mothers to start and keep breastfeeding.

I think one of the biggest gaps with breastfeeding is trying to keep mothers breastfeeding, this can only happen with support in the community, "at the coalface" in playgroups, mother groups, local medical centres eg subsidy of lactation / midwifery nurses wages at GP surgery to allow easy access to support and information for breastfeeding families.

"Education for Grandparents" can not be overlooked, refresher courses for Grandma is an avenue that has not been pursued in our community and it is often a new mother's mother who is turned to for advice. I was not a breastfed child and so my mother was quite lost for advice, support for me as a new breastfeeding mother. In her day she had been told that she didn't have enough breastmilk so I should be formula fed.

Use the media, the influence of media is profound in our society, we need to get the "breast is best" message into everyday Aussie language. Media is also an avenue to break down social barriers and preconceived ideas such as toddler breastfeeding, breast feeding in public, and breasts as a food source. Breasts – the most important job they will ever have – feeding your baby; eg Elle McPherson – the most rewarding job your boobs ever did – Sirens? Sports Illustrated Calendar??? No feeding her son Flynn! Run a financial comparison promotion eg A Current Affair, with cost of breastfeeding vs formula feeding. Recruit prominent Australian celebrities with breasts out – where is Rebecca Hewitt booby feeding Baby Mia at the Australian Open?

Breastfeeding is hard work, it is a skill, the emotional and psychological support a new family needs is immense in the first 6 weeks of a newborn's life. Continuity of care, support of the family unit, with health professionals is essential for successful breastfeeding. Group / Community midwifery practice is an effective way to provide this support. Expansion of these service delivery models from major hospitals as a more standard care option rather than just a "hippy peripheral" option should be strongly encouraged and supported by government. These programs have significantly better health outcomes with regards to both mother and neonates and at considerably less cost than traditional medical models. Offering of community / group midwifery practice into rural and remote areas should also be a priority. It is sad and shameful that most remote community Aboriginal women can not "birth on country".

A breastfeeding mother is a baby's sole food source for the first six months of life and this can be a heavy burden psychologically to carry. Happy confident mothers make happy confident breast feeders. Nurture the mummy, nurture the milk, and nurture the child.

With increasing pressure on women to return to the workforce, breastfeeding, childcare options and work flexibility issues need to be addressed. These issues may be beyond the scope of this inquiry but these issues are often cited as reasons women cease breastfeeding.

Statistics in Australian "Mothers and Babies" reports clearly illustrate the higher the education of the mother the longer she will breastfeed for. Information and knowledge is the key to encouraging breastfeeding. A new mother, father and extended family source information and knowledge about breastfeeding from many areas, health professionals, the media, past experience, friends and family. There is a need for government to influence attitudes about breastfeeding at a community/society level not just at a mother and a nurse in a birth suite in a metropolitan hospital.

Regards,

Karin Thorp