

Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Health and Aging  
House of Representatives,  
PO Box 6021,  
Parliament House,  
Canberra ACT 2600

27/2/07

Dear Sir / Madam

I wish to make comment on the Inquiry into the Health Benefits of Breastfeeding in particular relating to the sections of

- a. the extent of the health benefits of breastfeeding
- c. the potential short and long term impact on the health of Australians of increasing the rate of breastfeeding;
- d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding

As a mum of two children, I have breastfeed for a total of 40 months. When I first had my son, breastfeeding was an option but it wasn't the be all and end all. By the time my daughter came along 23 months later, thankfully, I knew better!

**a. the extent of the health benefits of breastfeeding**

The benefits of breastfeeding are not just for the baby and their mother (although they are quite substantial). There are also benefits for the health system, employers and the environment.

Women need to know that breastmilk contains all the nutrients their baby needs for the 1<sup>st</sup> six months of life and then it remains important for at least the next six. They need to know that there are antibodies present in their breastmilk that will help their baby to fight infections and illness meaning fewer trips to the doctor's surgery or emergency departments in our public hospitals therefore easing some of the strain on the hospital system. They need to know that fatty acids in breastmilk help brain development and no formula can replicate this. In this world of growing allergies, women need to know that breastfeeding helps to lower the risk of allergies and when allergies are present breastmilk helps to lower their impact. Eyesight, speech and jaw develop are enhanced due to breastmilk. Breastmilk and breastfeeding is also thought to lower the risk of SIDS. Breastfed babies are also less likely to be obese in their adulthood. Parents need to know all of this too.

What mother wouldn't want this for their child? Yet, are they presented with information that tells them this in the same way that financial formula companies that produce glossy brochures and samples? NO!

But what about mum? She receives many benefits too. Breastfeeding helps to reduce the incidence of breast and ovarian cancers, heart disease and osteoporosis. Breastfeeding helps mum to return to her pre-pregnant state, many women lose excess weight too and breastfeeding can delay the return of fertility too. It can also impact on mum's emotional health - she will always have a quick, convenient feed for her baby that is free, pre-warmed and ready to serve, morning, noon and night as she develops a loving bond with her baby.

Of course, our environment benefits too. There are fewer bottles, teats, formula tins and lids being dumped into our landfills. Because breastfeeding women often experience a delay in menstruation, landfill is again benefited with fewer tampons and sanitary napkins being disposed of. No energy resources are required to heat breastmilk and no chemicals need to clean the paraphernalia needed with bottle feeding. Parents can make a saving of up to \$2000 in the first year of baby's life by breastfeeding. Parents need to know this!

Formula companies have the financial backing to produce pleasing looking brochures, paper media advertisements and electronic media advertisements. They produce formula by the tin loads and ship it off to every available selling vantage point. This puts this product in viewing space for all mothers. Formulas are made to sound appealing and to being nearly as good as breastmilk. BUT THEY ARE NOT! There are still components of breastmilk that haven't been broken down and replicated. As cow's milk based products, formula feeding mums are introducing proteins into their baby's system to break down, which it is not designed to do – this can be harmful to a baby's gut. Do parents know this before they "choose" to formula-feed their baby?

### **C. the potential short and long term impact on the health of Australians of increasing the rate of breastfeeding;**

Keeping the benefits in mind, the short term impacts of a breastfeeding community can include -

- a healthy baby meaning mum takes fewer days off of work to be with a sick child not able to attend childcare, therefore a more productive employee
- a baby who develops a loving bond with mum early and matures into an independent toddler
- less rubbish in landfills
- less energy usage
- more money in a family's pocket for spending elsewhere.

The long term impacts of a breastfeeding community are

- a fitter and healthy community
- well adjusted adolescence who are less likely to be aggressive or struggle with mental health issues and suicide, as suggested by a recent research study
- a healthy community in the workforce meaning less time lost on sickness
- shorter waiting periods for hospital beds
- less money needing to be directed in the health care areas of cancers, diabetes and heart disease
- more energy and landfill resources available

### **d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding**

I believe formulas are far too readily available in our society. The Europeans have it right – the mothers wishing to formula feed their baby needs to go to a doctor and get a prescription to obtain it. We do this for many chemicals (prescriptions) in our world today, why not formulas? If we did introduce this system into Australia, it might make mothers research and find a better alternative to formula feeding, i.e. breastfeeding.

We need to explicitly follow the Who Code (World Health Organisation's International Code) of marketing of breastmilk substitutes including teats and bottles. Also, we need to ensure that, if formulas are to continue to be sold through supermarkets, pharmacies etc., that packaging is less appealing and not be compared with, or associated to, breastmilk. We need to reduce the amount and way formula companies advertise their product, to lessen the impact and availability to the community.

New mums do not know enough about the basics of breastfeeding before they give birth. They need to hear and see breastfeeding is as normal as pregnancy and birth. They need to be provided with as much literature about the benefits of breastfeeding and the risks of formula feeding as they are free samples of formulas. Mums need to be informed about breastfeeding before their baby is born, so at the very least, they make an informed decision about the best way to breastfeed their baby. New mums need to be given information about breastfeeding support groups like the Australian Breastfeeding Association and actively encouraged to become part of these groups.

There also needs to be education in the wider community about breastfeeding being normal and accepted. More venues need to be encouraged to welcome breastfeeding mothers, whether they are restaurants, cinemas or workplaces. Action needs to be taken against those community sectors that do not support the breastfeeding mum and baby through the Equal Opportunity Act.

Dad's need to be educated to accept that breastfeeding is going to benefit their baby, their partner and the environment for the future of their family. Women are 10 times more likely to breastfeed if they have a supportive husband.

A greater emphasis needs to be made on breastfeeding and the workplace allowing women the opportunity to return to work with expressing breaks, flexible working hours and child care facilities at, or near, their workplace.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association already has many initiatives that will help to facilitate this process.

- The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative
- The Baby-Friendly Workplace Accreditation
- The Breastfeeding Welcome here program
- Baby Care Rooms scattered through out Australian
- A breastfeeding helpline in every state and territory in Australian, many of which are operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by volunteers within their own homes.
- Breastfeeding Counsellors and Community Educators visit antenatal classes, postnatal classes and Breastfeeding Education Classes Australia-wide
- Group meetings are run throughout the calendar year to help mums network with other mothers who are breastfeeding and parenting in a supportive style.

Providing continuous government support to this Association would make a great impact on the improvement of breastfeeding rates within Australian and given time, would greatly improve the health of the Australian community.

Thank you for taking my submission into consideration.

Yours sincerely

*C Browne*

Cheryl Browne