

Melinda Tustian

27/2/07

The Secretary of the Committee on the Inquiry into Breastfeeding
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am pleased to see that there is an Inquiry into Breastfeeding occurring. As a breastfeeding mother of 2 children, and with 4 ½ years of current breastfeeding experience, I would like to address the following term of reference:

d. Initiatives to encourage breastfeeding

• **Greater education of health professionals on breastfeeding**

Breastfeeding, despite it being the normal way of feeding and nurturing infants, appears to be considerably undervalued and unsupported in Australia. As a breastfeeding mother of 2 children I have found that the knowledge of the medical and nursing professions regarding breastfeeding is seriously lacking. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of an infants life, and then breastfeeding to continue for 2 years and beyond. I suspect that most GPs and midwives are not even aware of this recommendation, or certainly do not take it seriously or encourage this.

A comment I received from a GP was that “there is no benefit in breastfeeding beyond 6 months”, when I was breastfeeding my 1 year old. The same GP also suggested prescribing tablets to dry up my milk when I had a bout of mastitis. She gave no information in managing or preventing mastitis, and was reluctant to prescribe me antibiotics, preferring to dry up my milk supply instead. I have thankfully received support from the Australian Breastfeeding Association so knew that there were other ways to deal with mastitis, but it made me extremely concerned about the number of mothers who are given this sort of information by their GP whose professional advice mothers tend to trust!

A comment from a midwife in the postnatal ward in the public hospital where I had my 2nd child and still breastfeeding my 1st child, was that I would no longer be able to breastfeed my 1st child as she would take away the nutrition that my newborn needed. This is blatant misinformation, and yet these are health professionals who are advising new mothers on breastfeeding everyday!

• **Greater education of the Australian public through a public health campaign/advertising etc**

In my experience, most mothers do not exclusively breastfeed until 6 months nor breastfeed until 2 years and beyond. Breastfeeding beyond 2 years is seen as “weird” or unnatural yet there are many advantages, both physical and emotional, to the child and mother.

Whilst breastfeeding in public is acceptable for a baby up until the age of about 1, breastfeeding an older child of 2, 3, 4 or 5 years or beyond, is seen as freakish or

abnormal, and breastfeeding mothers of older children tend to feed in private or don't talk about it as they are made to feel as though they are "taking things too far". I know this is the case in my own experience. The general population of Australia needs a great deal more education in breastfeeding being normal, and to accept and encourage breastfeeding beyond the age of 2 years.

- **A government funded national toll-free number for the Australian Breastfeeding Association**

The Australian Breastfeeding Association is a wonderful support to breastfeeding mothers and provides current information on breastfeeding management. However, the helpline system in NSW involves mothers making at least 2 calls before speaking to a breastfeeding counsellor. A funded national toll-free number would mean mothers seeking help would only need to phone the one number to speak to someone, and would not have to pay long-distance call fees if the only counsellor available was not in their area code region. Having help easily available can be the difference between a mother continuing breastfeeding or giving up.

- **Legislated 1 year paid maternity leave, plus the right to return to work part-time and to take lactation breaks. Also incentives for work-based child care**

If all new mothers were entitled to 1 year's paid maternity leave it would make it much easier for mothers to breastfeed their new baby for at least a year. Lactation breaks at work would enable those mothers who would like to return to work before 1 year to maintain their milk supply by having appropriate facilities to express their breastmilk. Work-based child care would make this even easier, as mothers would be able to visit their babies on-site to give them a breastfeed. Currently in NSW the state government has a "Family friendly" policy, however, returning to work part-time and lactation breaks are subject to approval of the manager, so a mother has no standing if her manager refuses these. The government should show Australia it values breastfeeding by legislating these measures.

I sincerely hope that this inquiry can bring about some positive changes to breastfeeding in Australia. Breastfeeding is normal, any other way of feeding a baby is substandard. A great deal of education is needed for health professionals especially so some correct information on breastfeeding is given to new mothers and a successful breastfeeding relationship established which can continue for 2 years and beyond.

Yours sincerely,
Melinda Tustian