

27 February 2007

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

Attention: The Honourable Alex Somlyay MP

In response to the invitation to make submissions addressing the terms of reference regarding the inquiry into breastfeeding, I have addressed the following for terms for your consideration:

- d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding*
- e. examine the effectiveness of current measures to promote breastfeeding*

In my elaborations, I will focus on the (positive) impacts that breastfeeding has on myself as a father, which no doubt can apply to other fathers out there.

Background

I am a husband of an ABA Counsellor and a father of three young children (four, three and 6 months). The two oldest have been breastfed (tandem at one stage) for several years. Our youngest is, of course, still breastfed.

Terms of Reference

d. initiatives to encourage breastfeeding

The role of a (male) partner in providing support during the period in which the child is breastfed is in my view seriously underestimated in society though extremely important. As a volunteer, I have been involved in leading discussions for 'new fathers' regarding breastfeeding and the role men play.

In our world where there is too often not enough support from others such as family or friends, paternal support is critical. Men can in numerous ways help encouraging their partner to start and continue to breastfeed their child, some of those ways include:

- the child's best interest should be the primary consideration – put on hold selfish feelings and wants and replace these with thoughts and actions which are in the child's best interest. Yes, one may have to go to work every day and one may be sleep deprived, but those things are temporary. It is for an adult man, in my belief, easier to cope with these 'uncomfortable' feelings than it is for a new born child dealing with being exposed to the big (scary) world.

- be supportive towards your partner, tell her that she can do it. The large majority of mother's are able to breastfeed. Don't tell your partner that she can't do it unless there are serious medical concerns. Go through it together as a team and be persistent. By telling her to just give up, you give up more than you can imagine. I have found that old fashioned fallacies are still very much alive, people telling you that you should just get your child on the bottle, feed once every 3-4 hours etc, 'your husband is right, he needs more sleep, just listen to him'. These fallacies include 'advice' by numerous health professionals, such as 'stop breastfeeding, your child needs formula because he is too small'. You can help your partner by doing research, by checking what was said and by finding reliable sources that support breastfeeding and tell you a story that sounds plausible.
- do simple things like taking our newborn out for an early walk while mum has a sleep-in, giving your partner regular massages, help out with day-to-day chores. Having a newborn baby can be overwhelming, especially for mother and child.
- breastfeeding support groups should focus more on the role the male partner – support groups in my opinion should be able (through funding) to more actively involve males in running classes for 'new fathers', have organised programs to communicate to the male society that we have an important role in encouraging our child's mother in breastfeeding and in educating other males. Currently, ABA is in the process of developing written and digital (DVD) materials (a campaign called 'Dads-It's about you too') aimed at the role fathers play in breastfeeding.
- like spending money? Well breastfeeding saves \$1,000s compared to buying formula. No doubt you can work out for yourself that this money can be invested in things which make your life more comfortable.

e. examine the effectiveness of current measures to promote breastfeeding

As mentioned above, I believe that there is serious scope for male partners and federal and local authorities to promote and support breastfeeding. The lack of current measures including limited male involvement (the feeling of not being part of it) as well as the shortage of breastfeeding education targeted at males is candidate for improvement. Awareness of breastfeeding may have to start at high school, for both girls and boys. These improvements should be initiated by breastfeeding support groups in conjunction with federal and local governments.

Maurice Hendriks

Proud husband of breastfeeding partner and father of three breastfed kids