

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to this parliamentary enquiry to express my concerns over the lack of understanding in the hospital system for breastfeeding mothers in crisis care.

I am now the very proud mother of two children, both born "naturally", and at the time without complications. My first child was less than 4 months old when after a week of serious pain I arrived at my physio in Macquarie Street for some help. My back was in spasm, and I had been shunted over the course of the long weekend from Balmain hospital (where I crawled on the floor to the consultation room) to RPA where I arrived in ambulance. At both hospitals I was accompanied by my rather distraught child and husband, and was given very strong pain relief – which in retrospect, little consideration for the effect this would have on my breast-fed child.

I remembered thinking later, that although the longer sleeping was a godsend in my current state; this was not normal behaviour for a child of this age. And although the medic were very concerned for my wellbeing, no one at any stage "clicked" that my physical health was linked to that of my child – directly in fact through my milk!!

By the time I arrived in St Vincent's emergency – on a Friday evening in peak hour traffic – again via ambulance I had virtually lost the use of my left leg – was on an increasing array of painkillers – yet had not been advised to NOT breast feed!

When asked to rate my pain I mentioned it was as close to the end of childbirth as I was willing to admit – I was then told I would be rushed into an emergency operation first thing that morning, and was placed on morphine, and something else- but STILL NOT TOLD to not breast feed.... No wonder my child was looking "out of it" we later joked we should have bottled that breast milk and sold it on the black market!

My exhausted child and husband went home... and when I emerged from surgery my milk had completely disappeared, and I was told I would be virtually immobile for the next 6 – 8 weeks.

At no point other than with one nurse was the emotional / physical effect of this situation touched upon, let alone the support for post operational care considered (I had no family support in Sydney as I was from the country). I didn't know breast milk could go? Did anyone think to forewarn me, or my family?

My husband had to teach my child to take the bottle – to both her and his unending distress as the formula did not agree, and she vomited at the end of every feed – so he overcompensated by overfeeding, and the cycle began.

The care I received for my back, and the quality of the surgery was exceptional, the nursing staffs that recognised my blood clots and responded accordingly were too exceptional... they are all intelligent and extremely well educated health professionals.

Why then did the fundamental nature of my primary need to care for my child go unnoticed?

Due mainly to perseverance on my behalf I continued to try and express – nothing ... for two weeks and then my milk did return, and so did the sanity of my household. I learnt to feed lying down, and the physical contact I was able to make with my daughter at this time helped me through what was a very rough period.

I am sure that I would not / could not be the first breast feeding mother to have ever had surgery in this hospital. A simple explanation of the possible risks/ outcomes, or some sort of support during this time would have been warranted, even the physio was unable to suggest what to do during feeding – if indeed I wanted to continue.

I am writing not to complain but to make the committee aware of the situation facing women, in what I, and many believe to be one of the best hospital systems in the world. Three major Sydney hospitals were unable to connect me and my child together at this moment – that to me seems endemic of a greater issue in society with mothers breastfeeding their children, and the interconnectivity of this relationship to both mother and child's physical and mental well being.

Michelle Leonard