

26.2.07

To whom it may concern.

I would like to make a submission regarding the inquiry into Breastfeeding and Health.

I am a mother of 3 children and am a community educator with the Australian Breastfeeding association.

As part of my role I volunteer to assist with Antenatal talks at the local hospital, visit mothers in hospital to inform them of the support on offer through the Australian Breastfeeding association, I attend local events raise awareness of breastfeeding within the general public and attend local meetings which give information on various aspects of breastfeeding, I also fundraise to enable my role to continue.

So often I am hearing from mothers who are misinformed about breastfeeding who wish they had accessed the Breastfeeding Association earlier and had known the facts about breastfeeding. I have found that the common reasons mothers give for ceasing breastfeeding is running out of milk and sore nipples. I find it so disappointing that two things, which are fairly easily resolved with correct and timely information, are stopping so many babies and mothers from gaining the health benefits breastfeeding provides. Even more disappointing is that it is not just the formula marketing that perpetuates the decline of breastfeeding but also the health professionals themselves.

I have listened quietly as I hear stories of mothers being released from hospital early before their milk has come in with no or little information about breastfeeding and then left to face the breastfeeding of their child on their own. They tell of how the chemist showed them how to mix the formula rather than putting them in touch with breastfeeding support. There is so little which can be said to this parent after the fact but so much that could be done before it gets to this point.

It seems that breastfeeding is being seen as an option to feeding a child rather than the normal thing to do. People are making decisions to wean their child due to pressure from health professionals, relatives and friends purely because marketers of formula have the backing of many dollars and the pro-breastfeeders are labeled as 'alternative.'

While mothers "know" that "breast is best" very few have any idea that this means that babies who are fed infant formula are sicker and that there are serious health risks associated (in causing allergy and type 1 diabetes) with even a single early exposure to infant formula. The aggressive marketing of toddler formula is having a negative impact, and leaves people believing that these milks are a health food and help the brain grow. Meanwhile the breastmilk which is the 'real deal' is discredited and mothers are placed in a mode of self-doubt about their body's ability to provide for their babies.

In a time when health rates are such an issue isn't it time for the big picture to be considered. Rather than looking at ways to address diabetes in adults what about looking at ways to increase breastfeeding rates so diabetes is minimised. Childhood cancer is on the increase due to chemicals in products and in plastics and yet formula (yes a word used in chemistry) in a plastic bottle is on the increase. All this while, a naturally occurring resource – breastmilk – which comes in an environmentally friendly package, which provides all the nutritional needs for a child for the first 6 months and beyond and which also reduces some cancer risks and increases immunity to disease is only promoted through the work of volunteers.

There is so much misinformation in the public arena about breastfeeding, from the minute a mother puts her baby to the breast people are providing her with ways to stop rather than encouraging her, praising her and celebrating the huge environmental and health benefit which is provided.

Even those within the health industry suffer from lack of information. This is apparent when a mother tells child health nurse she really wants to breastfeed but it hurts a little and she's not sure she's doing it right and the child health nurse tells her "you need to take the pressure off – how about giving your baby some formula so you can get some rest." Another mother is worried about whether she has enough milk but instead of being told to trust her body and her baby and given correct information and the supply and demand aspects of breastfeeding she is told ridiculous things like "there are occasions when feeding a small amount of formula from a bottle can help you to continue to breastfeed" despite the fact that giving complimentary feeds is the first step to the end of breastfeeding.

Ignorance breeds ignorance and whilst correct breastfeeding information is subtly suppressed the result is people feeling disempowered and babies not getting the breastmilk they have the right to receive.

Perhaps this comes from lack of training of health staff and the general public, perhaps it comes from health staff realizing that assisting a mother to breastfeed takes time whereas informing her of the location of the local chemist doesn't, perhaps it's because a 'volunteer' Breastfeeding Counsellor who comes in isn't seen as a para-professional whose knowledge and skills have come through extensive study and experience.

Fortunately those mothers that do get through the 'net of marketing' and judgement from others are the go resource in this country. They are the ones encouraging others who are breastfeeding, reminding them how well they are doing, sharing their stories of encountering breastfeeding issues successfully and empowering. They are the ones who see the community no longer seeing breastfeeding as normal, they see the community rely more and more on things which come in packages and they are the ones who are doing something about it.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association formed over 40 years ago has shown so much insight into this issue and has made a point of fostering their relationships with health professionals, providing information and suggestions - not advice to mothers, training their members in a way which most Registered Training Organisations are only just considering, staying in touch with the World Health Organisations views, and has played a pivotal role in keeping breastfeeding alive. Keeping breastfeeding alive means money and for the Australian Breastfeeding association it has meant fundraising at every step, cooking sausages, selling raffles, attending fairs with wares to sell. It's a shame the work these volunteers do to impart breastfeeding information has to be constantly put on hold so some money can be raised.

Rather than allowing manufacturers unethically talking about their new improved products and mislabeling baby food the Government should be informing the community at large about the importance of breastfeeding. Rather than mothers breastfeeding in a culture which only sees it as valid for a few months the Government should be informing the community of the RISKS of premature weaning. Rather than having those with the breastfeeding experience and training cooking sausages on a Saturday morning the Government should be funding structured breastfeeding support. Rather than just putting money into the epidemics which are occurring as a result of the lack of breastfeeding the Government should be enabling women to continue breastfeeding through good support, education and maternity leave structures.

There is a workforce of volunteers skilled and equipped to help breastfeeding become the norm, make use of them before they too have been subtly 'marketed out.'

Regards

Jane McKellar