



**Australian Government**

**Australian Government Response to:**

***The Best Start: Report on the inquiry into the health benefits of  
breastfeeding***

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing's  
Inquiry into the Health Benefits of Breastfeeding**

**December 2008**

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing  
Report on the Inquiry into the Health Benefits of Breastfeeding  
“The Best Start”**

**Introduction**

The Australian Government recognises that breastfeeding ensures the best possible start to a baby’s health, growth and development. Its protective effects against a range of conditions for mother and infant are well founded.

The inquiry into the health benefits of breastfeeding conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing received 479 submissions, conducted public hearings in several states and undertook site visits, culminating in its report entitled *The Best Start Report on the Inquiry into the Health Benefits of Breastfeeding* (the Report). The Report is an impressive document and the Government thanks the Committee and the various stakeholders for their valuable and thoughtful input to the Inquiry.

This Government is particularly committed to leading early childhood reforms and to ensuring that children are born healthy and have access to the support, care and education that equips them for life and learning. It is committed to making preventative health care and health promotion a major focus of Australia’s health system, and supporting activities that will promote and raise Australia’s breastfeeding rates is fundamental to ensuring that children get the optimal start.

Since taking office the Australian Government has committed significant funding to various initiatives to support breastfeeding, including:

- \$2.5 million over five years to expand the Australian Breastfeeding Association’s telephone counselling service to provide mothers, their partners and families with access to breastfeeding advice and peer support around the clock, at no cost to callers. This will benefit all breastfeeding families and improve access to breastfeeding support in regional, rural and remote areas;
- \$1.8 million over four years to support education and the provision of information resources, as well as health professionals training and support; and
- \$1.15 million over four years for research and improved data collection including:
  - conducting a national survey and research to obtain more information about breastfeeding rates and practices and to gain a greater understanding of the barriers and enablers affecting women’s decisions to breastfeed;
  - developing dietary guidelines for pregnant and breastfeeding women and reviewing the 2003 *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents incorporating the Infant Feeding Guidelines for Health Workers*; and
- Developing national antenatal clinical practice guidelines for managing the care of healthy pregnant women from pre-pregnancy to the post-natal period.

Indigenous health is a particularly high priority for this Government and we have developed a comprehensive package as part of our commitment to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation, and halve the gap in mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade.

The Government's *New Directions: An Equal Start in Life for Indigenous Children* includes \$112 million for maternal and child health programs that allow expanded access to antenatal care; standard information about baby care (including breastfeeding); practical advice and assistance with parenting; monitoring of developmental milestones by a primary health care service; and testing of Indigenous children's hearing, sight, and speech before starting school. Six sites have already been funded under this initiative and further sites are expected to be announced before the end of 2008.

This Report and its recommendations have informed Government policy in various ways and will continue to do so. The Government's Maternity Services Review will canvass a wide range of issues relevant to maternity services, including antenatal services, birthing options, postnatal services up to six weeks after birth, and peer and social support for women in the perinatal period. This review will inform the development of a national action plan for maternity services. A discussion paper was released in September 2008 and a report is due to the Minister for Health and Ageing in December 2008.

Many of the Report's recommendations present opportunities for governments to adopt a coordinated and consistent approach to research and data collection that is essential for building and maintaining an evidence base, and enabling the delivery of best-practice breastfeeding support and education services for parents and improving the quality of professional health services. The Australian Government will provide national leadership in supporting and promoting breastfeeding by inviting State and Territory Governments to collaborate on the development and implementation of a National Breastfeeding Strategy.

This response addresses the recommendations raised in the Report, and has been coordinated and prepared by the Department of Health and Ageing, incorporating input from a range of government agencies, including the:

- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet;
- The Treasury;
- Attorney-General's Department;
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations;
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; and
- Department of Finance and Deregulation.

To assist the reader, some responses have been grouped together to link relevant recommendations.

## Recommendations and Responses

### Recommendation 1

**That the Department of Health and Ageing coordinate and oversee the implementation of a national strategy to promote and support breastfeeding in Australia, including providing leadership in the area of monitoring, surveillance and evaluation of breastfeeding data**

Agreed.

The Australian Government welcomes this recommendation and will provide national leadership in supporting and promoting breastfeeding by inviting State and Territory Governments, through the Australian Health Ministers' Conference (AHMC), to collaborate on the development and implementation of a National Breastfeeding Strategy.

The Australian Government is commissioning quantitative and qualitative research including a national infant feeding survey and research into mothers', partners' and health professionals' attitudes to and experiences with breastfeeding and the barriers and enablers that influence breastfeeding initiation, continuation and duration.

### Recommendation 2

**The Department of Health and Ageing implement the recommendations in the *Towards a national system for monitoring breastfeeding in Australia* document commissioned by the Commonwealth Government in 2001**

Agreed.

The Department of Health and Ageing is working with stakeholders to update the breastfeeding data indicators recommended in the 2001 report *Towards a national system for monitoring breastfeeding in Australia* in light of new research and guidelines available from Australian and international sources including the World Health Organization.

The Australian Government supports the objective of establishing a basic set of indicators and definitions as the basis for a system to monitor breastfeeding trends in Australia as recommended in *Towards a national system for monitoring breastfeeding in Australia*. This objective will be pursued in the context of developing a National Breastfeeding Strategy.

### **Recommendations 3, 4 and 9**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund research into:**

- **the long-term health benefits of breastfeeding for the mother and infant; and**
- **the evaluation of strategies to increase the rates of exclusive breastfeeding to six months**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund research into best practice in programs that encourage breastfeeding, including education programs, and the coordination of these programs**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing commission a study into the economic benefits of breastfeeding**

Agreed in part.

The Australian Government recognises that there is a large existing body of research and systematic reviews documenting the association between breastfeeding and infant, maternal and longer term health and acknowledges the social and economic benefits associated with breastfeeding.

The Australian Government considers it a priority to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of programs intended to increase breastfeeding rates, in particular those targeting increased exclusive breastfeeding to six months and longer duration of breastfeeding, consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines. Priorities for evaluating best practice in programs that encourage breastfeeding, including education programs and the coordination of these programs, will be canvassed with state and territory governments during the development of the National Breastfeeding Strategy.

### **Recommendation 5**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund the Australian Breastfeeding Association to expand its current breastfeeding helpline to become a toll-free national breastfeeding helpline**

Agreed.

In the 2008-09 Budget, the Australian Government provided \$2.5 million over five years to the Australian Breastfeeding Association to upgrade its communications infrastructure to create a national 24 hour breastfeeding helpline service. The national 1800 number is expected to be fully operational by the end of December 2008.

The expansion of the breastfeeding helpline will provide mothers, their partners and families, including those in rural and remote areas, with access to breastfeeding advice and peer support, around the clock, at no cost to callers.

## **Recommendation 6**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund a national education campaign to highlight:**

- **the health benefits of breastfeeding to mothers and babies;**
- **that breastfeeding is the normal way to feed a baby;**
- **that the use of breast milk is preferable to the use of infant formula; and**
- **the supportive role that the community can play with breastfeeding**

Agreed in principle.

A targeted national education campaign to reach mothers who are less likely to breastfeed without additional encouragement and support will be considered in consultation with the states and territories as part of the development of a National Breastfeeding Strategy.

The Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs currently funds the Raising Children Network parenting website at [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au) and the Raising Children DVD. The website is designed to help parents fulfil their parenting roles by providing centralised, Australian-focussed, evidence based parenting information for parents with children aged 0 to 8 years of age. The website includes comprehensive information on breastfeeding including a number of film clips providing practical demonstrations. In addition, the '*Raising Children*' DVD was developed to help parents who do not have a computer or access to the internet to receive up to date, quality assured parenting information. The DVD is provided free of charge to new parents as part of Centrelink's Parent Pack.

## **Recommendations 7 and 11**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund an awards program, which provides recognition for workplaces, public areas and shopping centres that have exemplary breastfeeding facilities**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing provide additional funding for the Australian Breastfeeding Association to expand the Breastfeeding-Friendly Workplace Accreditation (BFWA) Program nationally to enable the accreditation of more workplaces**

Noted.

The Australian Government, together with a number of project partners, funds the National Work and Family Awards administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The National Work and Family Awards provide public recognition to employers with outstanding flexible work practices, including support for breastfeeding mothers.

The 2009 National Work and Family Awards will be expanded to establish an accreditation process and symbol for employers that achieve certain standards in work and family balance and include separate awards for industry sectors such as retail, mining, hospitality, manufacturing and finance sectors.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association's Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace Accreditation program was awarded an Australian Government grant through the 2007-08 Women's Leadership and Development Programme administered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs' Office for Women. This one-off grant funding is to employ project personnel in each state and territory to facilitate promotion and implementation of breastfeeding-friendly workplace projects. The project is expected to be completed by May/June 2009.

#### **Recommendation 8**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund a feasibility study for a network of milk banks in Australia including the development of a national regulatory and quality framework within which a network of milk banks in Australia could operate. The feasibility study should include funding pilot programs at the Mothers Milk Bank at the John Flynn Private Hospital, Gold Coast and the King Edward Memorial Hospital milk bank in Perth**

Agreed in part.

The Australian Government acknowledges the need for risk management and quality control for human milk banks. In the context of developing a National Breastfeeding Strategy, the Australian Government will work with states and territories to consider the evidence, quality assurance and regulatory issues, including the existing best practice guidelines developed by the PREM Bank at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Perth.

Under new broad banded funding arrangements for the National Health Care Agreement, the states and territories will have considerable flexibility to fund services in accordance with local needs and priorities.

#### **Recommendation 10**

**That the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate take the appropriate measures to enable the formal accreditation by the Australian Breastfeeding Association of Parliament House as a Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace**

Noted.

The Australian Government notes the announcements by the presiding officers of the House of Representatives and the Senate on 16 October 2008 that Parliament House has been accredited as a Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace.

## **Recommendation 12**

### **That the Treasurer move to exempt lactation aids such as breast-pumps, nipple shields and supply lines from the Goods and Services Tax**

Not agreed.

Lactation equipment, feeding bottles and teats are not GST free because they fall outside the broad food and health concessions in GST law. To make lactation equipment GST free, a specific concession would need to be created in the GST law. This would add to the complexity of the law, thereby increasing compliance and administrative costs. The GST operates most efficiently when applied to as broad a range of goods and services as possible. Every additional exemption adds to the complexity of the GST system and increases the compliance costs of taxpaying entities, which are passed on to consumers.

## **Recommendation 13**

### **That the Attorney General investigate whether breastfeeding is given suitable consideration in the implementation of shared custody arrangements and also provide advice to the Family Law Court and Family Relationships Centres on the importance of breastfeeding**

Agreed.

The *Family Law Act 1975* expressly provides that in proceedings for a parenting order in relation to a child, the court must regard the best interests of the child as the paramount consideration. Where parents have failed to agree the court is empowered to make a parenting order relating to whom the child lives with, time spent with a parent or any other aspect of parental responsibility. In making such an order, the paramount consideration is the best interests of the child.

In determining what is in the child's best interests, the court must take into account a wide range of factors. These include each parent's capacity to care for the child, the child's maturity, sex and cultural background. The range of factors would encompass the court considering appropriate care, such as the benefits of maintaining a breastfeeding regime as appropriate, commensurate with the developmental stage of the child.

Consistent with this, Family Relationship Centres and funded Government Family Dispute Resolution services are required to be child focused and encourage parents to focus on their children's needs (including health and developmental needs) when helping them to develop parenting arrangements after separation. Breastfeeding may be one of a number of issues that parents would need to consider in making parenting arrangements.

The Attorney-General has written to the Family Court of Australia and the Federal Magistrates Court to ask them to consider the information in the report about the importance of breastfeeding. The Attorney-General has asked his department to write to the Family Relationship Centres about the health benefit of breastfeeding in light of the report.



## **Recommendation 14**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing fund the Australian College of Midwives to run the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative in Australia, to facilitate the accreditation of all maternity hospitals**

Noted.

The Australian Government will consider supporting the Baby Friendly Health Initiative in light of the outcomes of the Government's Maternity Services Review that is currently canvassing a wide range of issues relating to maternity services, including antenatal services, birthing options, postnatal services up to six weeks after birth, and peer and social support for women in the perinatal period.

## **Recommendations 15 and 16**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing work with the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (and/or equivalent accreditation organisation) towards including Baby Friendly Hospital status as part of the accreditation process**

**That the Commonwealth Government, when negotiating future Australian Health Care Agreements, require state and territory governments to report on the number of maternity wards in public hospitals that have been accredited under the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative**

Agreed in principle.

The Australian Government supports the broad objectives of quality assurance and transparency in this area and the Department of Health and Ageing will raise this issue with the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards.

The Australian Government notes that reporting on Baby Friendly accredited health services is already in place through the Australian College of Midwives' Baby Friendly Health Initiative website at [http://www.bfhi.org.au/text/bfhi\\_hospitals.html](http://www.bfhi.org.au/text/bfhi_hospitals.html).

## **Recommendation 17**

**That the Minister for Health and Ageing, in consultation with state and territory health ministers, decide on a standard infant growth chart to be used in all states and territories**

Agreed in principle.

Infant growth charts will be considered as part of the Australian Government's review of the *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia incorporating the Infant Feeding Guidelines for Health Workers* being undertaken by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

The Australian Government will subsequently consult with state and territory governments about the merits of adopting a single, evidence based population level reference for use as a growth monitoring tool and the need for appropriate education and explanatory materials to ensure growth charts are interpreted appropriately.

### **Recommendation 18**

**That the Minister for Health and Ageing provide Medicare provider/registration numbers to International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLC) as allied health professionals**

Noted.

The majority of International Board Certified Lactation Consultants in Australia are registered midwives. As part of the Maternity Services Review, the Government is considering a range of issues, including the role of midwives in the provision of maternity care.

### **Recommendation 19**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing provide leadership in the area of monitoring, surveillance and evaluation of breastfeeding rates and practices in Indigenous populations in both remote and other areas**

Agreed.

The Government is investigating options for the collection of such data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants through the national infant feeding survey, or through other national surveys such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework (HPF) has been developed under the auspice of the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC). The HPF includes one measure on breastfeeding practices for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Reports are prepared against the HPF every two years. The HPF utilises National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey data collected by the ABS (collected at 6 year intervals).

### **Recommendation 20**

**That the Commonwealth Government promote breastfeeding within Indigenous Australian communities as a major preventative health measure**

Agreed.

The Australian Government has committed to halving the mortality gap for Indigenous children under five within a decade. As a first step, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development with joint funding of around half a billion dollars over six years to address the needs of Indigenous children in their early years. This includes funding from the Australian Government to improve access to and take-up of antenatal care provided to mums of Indigenous babies, as well as funding for teenage sexual and reproductive health programs.

The main objectives of the National Partnership are to:

- improve developmental outcomes for Indigenous children and achieve key targets as agreed by COAG;
- achieve sustained improvements in pregnancy and birth outcomes for Indigenous women and infants; and
- improve Indigenous families' use of the early childhood development services they need to optimise the development of their children.

The election commitment *New Directions: An Equal Start in Life for Indigenous Children* will contribute to closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation and halving the gap in mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade. 'New Directions' includes three inter-related components: child and maternal health services; early development and parenting support; and literacy and numeracy in the early years. The child and maternal health component of *New Directions* provides \$112 million for comprehensive Mothers and Babies Services, a Rheumatic Fever Strategy and an Indigenous Mother's Accommodation Fund.

Under Mothers and Babies Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their mothers will be provided with access to antenatal care; standard information about baby care (including breastfeeding); practical advice and assistance with parenting; monitoring of developmental milestones by a primary health care service; and testing of Indigenous children's hearing, sight, and speech before starting school. Six sites have already been funded for the Mothers and Babies Services and further sites are expected to be announced before the end of 2008. The Commonwealth's commitment to the Mothers and Babies Services component of *New Directions* is reflected in the Indigenous Early Childhood Development National Partnership.

The Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program (funded under Health@Home Plus) will provide regular home visiting services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in targeted high need areas. Commencing in the pre-natal period, health professionals will provide home visiting services to women pregnant with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, continuing until the child is two years old.

The Program will provide a structured, sustained nurse-led home visiting program to improve pregnancy outcomes by helping women engage in good preventive health practices; support parents to improve child health and development (including the promotion of healthy breastfeeding practices); and help parents develop a vision for their own future, including continuing education and finding work. Three sites have been approved to deliver the Program and a further two sites will be selected by the end of 2008.

## **Recommendation 21**

**That Food Standards Australia New Zealand change the labelling requirements for foods for infants under Standard 2.9.2 of the Food Standards Code to align with the NHMRC Dietary Guidelines recommendation that a baby should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months**

Noted.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand's Proposal P274 – Review of Minimum Age Labelling of Foods for Infants, is reviewing the minimum age labelling requirements in Standard 2.9.2 of the *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code*. The August 2008 Preliminary Final Assessment Report proposed varying the minimum reference age on infant food labels to “Around 6 months” and amending the current warning statement to “Not for infants under the age of 4 months”. Following consideration of issues raised through public consultation on the Preliminary Final Assessment Report, a Final Assessment Report is anticipated to be considered by the FSANZ Board in early 2009, followed by consideration by the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council.

## **Recommendation 22**

**That the Department of Health and Ageing adopt the World Health Organisation's International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions**

Noted.

The Australian Government will consider Australia's response to the World Health Organisation's International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and related World Health Assembly resolutions in the context of developing a National Breastfeeding Strategy.