

26 February 2007-02-26

RE: INQUIRY INTO BREASTFEEDING

I have been interested in breastfeeding and its impact on our society for many years. Breastfeeding is about so much more than just child nutrition. A successful breastfeeding relationship between a mother and her baby can have positive ramifications – both short and long term – not just for the mother and baby, but for those in their immediate family, those in their extended family and those in their community.

The physical health benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and baby have been fairly widely documented; lower incidences of allergies, asthma, infections, certain cancers and obesity to name a few. Generally, breastfed babies have far fewer medical visits and hospitalisations than babies who are not breastfed. Therefore, if more babies were breastfed, it would definitely have a positive impact on the amount of money spent on health care in this country, not only during the first years of their lives, but across the whole of their lives because diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are also positively impacted upon by a person having been breastfed as a child.

While the physical health benefits of breastfeeding are well-documented, the emotional, social and psychological benefits are not so widely studied or commented upon and yet they are equally important for the health and well-being of our country's population. The trust that develops between a mother and her baby during a successful breastfeeding relationship is the basis for further successful relationships as the child grows and ventures more widely out into the community. The more successful the primary relationships of a child, the more likely it is that that child will go on to function healthily in the long-term socially, emotionally and psychologically.

Regarding the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry into Breastfeeding, I offer the following suggestions. With reference to points:

- a) the extent of the health benefits of breastfeeding
- c) the potential short and long term impact on the health of Australians of increasing the rate of breastfeeding and
- f) the impact of breastfeeding on the long term sustainability of Australia's health system

If you want facts and figures on the short and long term health benefits of breastfeeding and the impact of improving breastfeeding rates on our health system, then there are numerous studies to which you can refer. The Lactation Resource Centre in Melbourne should be able to provide you with data on these matters. They should also be able to provide information regarding point

- b) evaluate the impact of marketing of breast milk substitutes on breastfeeding rates and, in particular, in disadvantaged, Indigenous and remote communities.

With reference to point e) examine the effectiveness of current measures to promote breastfeeding. If you want information regarding our low breastfeeding rates at 3, 6 and 12 months, ask most mothers, regardless of age. The mothers in any neighbourhood should be able to provide this data. This remark may seem cynical, but it's true. If you speak to a random sample of mothers of any age, you will hear sad, angry, frustrated and scary tales of breastfeeding. The negative feelings associated with an unsuccessful breastfeeding relationship can have a significant and lasting impact on a woman.

With reference to point d) initiatives to encourage breastfeeding

If you want information regarding successful breastfeeding, ask those who have succeeded. They are probably harder to find, but would be a positive resource to use in your inquiry. Contacting the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) would be useful in this regard.

As to specific suggestions regarding initiatives to encourage breastfeeding, I offer the following list, in no particular order, for your consideration. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but is one which I offer to you as a mother, as a woman, as a member of my local community and as an Australian. When looking at strategies for the support of breastfeeding it is important to remember that breastfeeding is a constantly evolving relationship so it needs different sorts of support and nurturing at different stages of its evolution.

Support in the early hours, days and weeks of breastfeeding is crucial. New mother-baby pairs do not operate in a corporate 9 to 5 world; they operate in a 24-hour-day world, governed by the baby's needs. They need access to help when it suits them, not when it suits the wider community. They need access to consistent, factual and simple advice. Breastfeeding problems are very immediate: a baby needs to be fed. Many breastfeeding issues can be resolved with a few simple suggestions and a lot of encouragement and reassurance in the early days. These same issues, if left untended, can become the beginning of the eventual failure of the breastfeeding relationship for that particular mother-baby pair. I therefore suggest

- Funding to provide staff who have the time to sit with a mother in hospital and help her establish breastfeeding
- Funding to support a 24 hour help line
- Funding to provide advertising of this help line (pamphlets, radio, TV, fridge magnets, newspapers, billboards) and the benefits of using it
- Funding to provide basic breastfeeding information to all medical personnel including doctors, nurses, pharmacists and complementary health practitioners
- Funding to provide basic breastfeeding information to the wider community
- Funding to provide at-home breastfeeding support over a number of hours per visit and over a number of visits during the first six weeks of the baby's life
- Funding to provide practical home help for some new mothers to give them time to establish the breastfeeding relationship
- Funding to encourage hospitals to become accredited as Baby Friendly
- Legislation regarding the advertising, pricing and availability of artificial infant milk and its accessories
- Legislation regarding the rights of mothers who return to paid employment whilst still breastfeeding
- Funding for ongoing support in various forms such as reading material, health visits, advertisements, group support, community information and advertising that helps address the issues that arise when breastfeeding babies at different stages of their growth
- Funding for a campaign to promote breastfeeding as the preferred method of infant feeding

History and scientific research support breastfeeding as being best for baby and mother and, consequently, for society. Rather than spending a lot of time, effort and money on researching whether or not we should encourage breastfeeding, I believe that our efforts would be better spent in researching how to support mothers and babies in a successful breastfeeding relationship. By investing in supporting mothers through the early weeks of establishing a successful breastfeeding relationship with each child, we will be investing in the future health and well-being of Australia, not just at a physical level but also at a social, emotional and psychological level which can only be beneficial for our country.