

Parliamentary Inquiry into Breastfeeding, 2007

This submission to the Inquiry is an endorsement of the work of the Australian Breastfeeding Association and the benefits of paid maternity leave, from a personal point of view. It aims to address two terms of reference and makes suggestions about a possible public education campaign on breastfeeding.

1. The effectiveness of current measures to promote breastfeeding, (from a personal perspective)

The Australian Breastfeeding Association

I have been a member of the Australian Breastfeeding Association since shortly after the birth of my daughter and have been a reasonably active member in a regional town and metropolitan area. *I do not speak on behalf of the Association but offer these observations after five years of involvement.* The ABA offered me mother- to- mother support, advice and well researched written information and this contributed to me being able to continue breastfeeding my children after I returned to work and for extended periods. It also inspired me to learn more about breastfeeding and talk to other mothers about the importance of mother- to- mother support. In a society where breastfeeding a baby beyond the age of one is considered strange, this support was very important.

As the Committee of Inquiry members will be aware from other submissions, the ABA is the only national organization to support and advocate on behalf of breastfeeding women (and increasingly the partners of breastfeeding women and babies). It also works to promote and educate the public and professionals about the benefits of a breastfeeding and is unique in its position as a largely volunteer-run organization that also provides 24 hour telephone counseling about breastfeeding. What's even more astounding is that the ABA draws on a volunteer base of women who are probably at the busiest time of their lives – parenting young children and combining this with other responsibilities.

It is not overstating the case to say that the ABA fulfills many of the services and roles that should be funded directly by government; services for new mothers who require breastfeeding support and the general promotion of breastfeeding as the 'norm'. It also campaigns against the inappropriate marketing of breast milk substitutes, which remains a substantial problem. An appreciation of the pernicious nature of infant formula marketing is something that has escaped many Victorian Department of Human Services officials who allowed Wyeth (a formula manufacturer) to sponsor a large conference for Maternal and Child Health Nurses, who are key health professionals in supporting women's feeding choices.

The support offered by the ABA is incredibly important to the welfare of women and babies and the community as a whole and yet the ABA is forced to survive largely on a mixture of small one off grants, its membership income, plus income derived from fundraising, sponsorship and its merchandising arm "Mothers Direct".

Given the ABA's work on a topic that has such enormous health ramifications for the community, it is important that it is well resourced.

If governments are serious about promoting and supporting breastfeeding, then the ABA must be given a more secure financial footing and an ongoing stream of income that

allows it to extend its support services, provide more professional development for midwives and maternal and child health nurses, and initiate public education campaigns.

Recommendation: Matched state/federal Government financial support for the each state and territory ABA telephone counselling service and further incentives for maternity services to achieve Baby-Friendly Hospital accreditation.

2. Initiatives to encourage breastfeeding

Paid maternity leave

The support of my employer at the time of the birth of my first baby also made the establishment and continuation of breastfeeding more possible. I was given 12 weeks paid maternity leave and flexible arrangements on return to work, including being able to work from home. My partner also had a few weeks parental leave. Many other western nations offer paid parental leave – why is it so difficult for Australia to do the same? By offering the Baby Bonus, the government is admitting that families need financial help when a baby is born. The next logical step must be paid parental leave.

Recommendation: Statutory paid parental leave (12 weeks) for women in paid work, regardless of their employment status (casual/part time/full time) at the time of the birth of the baby.

Public education campaign

Other submissions to this inquiry have detailed the extensive health benefits of breastfeeding, and the fact that we are still falling far short of the National Health and Medical Council recommendations about exclusive breastfeeding until a baby is at least 6 months old. Things will not change unless there is a focused and consistent effort by government and the health care system at all levels. Over the past few decades we have witnessed massive public education campaigns about the dangers of drink driving, smoking and sun exposure. These campaigns have resulted in changes of behaviour (seat belt wearing for example). We are seeing government's respond rapidly (at least in their rhetoric) to substance misuse/ binge drinking in young people and the latest reported escalating use of the illegal drug 'ice'.

Isn't it time we had similar initiatives about the benefits of breastfeeding and the risks of bottle feeding? Many would welcome a bold TV and radio advertising campaign that celebrates with dignity, humour and sensitivity the breast, not as a sexualized part of the female anatomy, but as source of nutrition for babies and toddlers.

Recommendation: That the Federal Government launch a multi-million dollar public education campaign about breastfeeding involving TV/radio/on-line/print. The strong public health messages and images in this campaign would speak not only to pregnant women and new mothers, but men and the community in general, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Key messages could say (among other things)

- that breastfeeding can help to prevent obesity, and a range of illnesses in children and breast and ovarian cancer in women.

- that its OK to breastfeed in public;
- that yes, breastfeeding can be hard for some women, but if you get the right support, and persevere many problems can be sorted out;
- babies deserve the best and the best food is from the breast.
- Many employers can accommodate breastfeeding women so they don't have to give up when returning to work.
- Dads matter too – helping your partner when a new baby comes along is the best gift you can give your family
- The cost effectiveness of breastfeeding – no bottles/teats/formula etc
- Benefits to the environment – no waste

I hope this current Inquiry can result in some positive policy changes and considerable resources both at Federal and State government level.

(signed)

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