

# Supporting our babies, showing our breasts

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The Federation of Commercial TV Stations has performed a welcome back-flip on its rating of an Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) Community Service Announcement, which shows a mother breastfeeding her baby. (CM 20/3) Its initial assessment and PG rating, with the implication that the sight of 'too much breast' might disturb a young child, has now been modified to a G rating, but this process has exposed some deep-seated attitudes towards women's breasts and the act of breastfeeding, that, to my mind, verge on 'mammophobia'.

Perhaps the ruling agency was unaware that we are a mammalian species- that is, we are defined by our mammarys (breasts) and their ability to nourish and nurture our young. Further, with the average age of breastfeeding worldwide estimated at 4.2 years, they initially assumed that children who are young enough to breastfeed are not old enough to see woman's breast performing its natural, mammalian function on TV.

As a GP, writer and mother of four children, all long-term breastfeeders, I feel sad that these attitudes are still so strong in our culture. Scantly clad women's bodies in sexually provocative poses can be on public display, but we remain uncomfortable about showing our breasts in public to feed our babies. This attitude is very specific to western cultures-even in Muslim countries fully veiled women have no embarrassment about exposing a breast to feed a hungry baby in a public place. It is exactly this misplaced discomfort which the ABA are wanting to counter with this 30 second ad, due to be released this week.

This is, I believe, a major public health issue. As Baumslag and Michels note, in their book *Milk, Money and Madness* (1995, Bergin and Garvey) "When women start feeling self-conscious about exposure of their breasts, they start thinking about other ways to feed their infants." And so the formula companies find a niche to appropriate, moving in with their huge budgets and forceful marketing practices. In Australia, around 12% of babies are formula-fed from birth, but by 6 months, more than 50% of babies are being raised in non-human milk.

This lack of breastfeeding is producing a huge burden of disease in our community. Babies who are not breastfed have higher rates of hospitalisation and death in their first year, even in developed countries. They also are more likely to suffer from SIDS, diarrhoeal and respiratory illnesses, bacterial meningitis, ear infections,

**allergies, asthma, urinary infections, inguinal hernias, childhood lymphomas (cancers), juvenile diabetes, coeliac disease, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, reflux, dental cavities and malocclusion, and to have poorer speech development, slower social development, lower IQ and lower school grades than their breastfed peers.**

**As they grow into adulthood, non-breastfed individuals are also at increased risk of inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis), multiple sclerosis and cardiovascular disease. Adults who have never been breastfed are 6 times more likely to be obese than those who were breastfed for more than 12 months, and non-breastfed females are 33% more likely to develop breast cancer. Cancers of the ovary and endometrium (uterus) are also more common in non-breastfed females.**

**Breastfeeding offers major health benefits to us as mothers. For example, we reduce our own risk of breast cancer by 25% for every 6 months that we breastfeed, and we have a lower chance of osteoporosis- thinning bones- in older age. Breastfeeding also gives us the benefits that come with a delay in the return of our fertile cycles such as less chance of conception and better iron levels because of delayed menstruation.**

**As well as all of the above health benefits, breastfeeding offers other intrinsic rewards to mothers and babies. For all mammals, these include the effects of the breastfeeding hormones oxytocin, the hormone of love; endorphins, hormones of pleasure; and prolactin, the mothering hormone. These hormones, which we release each time we breastfeed, keep us calm, relaxed, and lovingly focussed on our babies, and our babies also receive love and pleasure via the oxytocin and endorphins in our breastmilk.**

**The act of breastfeeding also gives our babies holding, touch, skin-to-skin contact, visual, oral and tactile stimulation, and deep-seated security - some writers have described breastmilk as liquid love. Erasmus Darwin- Charles' grandfather- credits a baby's suckling pleasure (and mechanism) for the origin of our human smile.**

**In short, breastfeeding is the one of the most effective preventative health measures that exists, and offers the best that nature can give for mothers and for babies.**

**If breastfeeding was a commercial intervention, backed by big business, its benefits would be loudly proclaimed, and our breasts would extolled for their beautiful and miraculous functions. Television would be replete with images of mothers breastfeeding their babies at all times of the day, and we would all smile—adults and children alike- when we saw a woman breastfeeding her baby in public.**

**Breastfeeding is supported in our culture, but not as well as it could be. Community attitudes need to shift, and the ad produced for the ABA is a wonderful start. I look forward to the time when we appreciate, as do our Muslim sisters, that breastfeeding is the right of every baby, and that the benefits and pleasures of the breastfeeding relationship provide, naturally, our nourishment for a lifetime.**