AIMS For a better birth...

Breast is Best

AIMS Journal, 2008, Vol 20, No 1

Emily Cox wonders why policy conflicts?

- **Breast is best**
- **Breastfeed your baby exclusively for six months**
- **Breastfeed on demand**
- **Breastfeeding improves babies immunity**
- **Breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life**

Sound familiar? It should do. All of these government messages are shoved into the hand of every expectant mother. Breastfeeding is of course in the very best interests of the baby (let's ignore for now all the benefits to the mother, they are not relevant to this article.).

It's not just the British government who thinks that - let's have a look at statements in some of the international conventions in place which this country is signed up to.

Convention of Rights of the Child - United Nations
24 (e) To ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, haveaccess to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, the advantages of breastfeeding, hygiene and environmental sanitation and the prevention of accidents

Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding - WHO
All mothers should have access to skilled support to initiate and sustain exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months and ensure the timely introduction of adequate and safe complementary foods with continued breastfeeding up to two years or beyond

Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding - UNICEF
As a global goal for optimal maternal and child health and nutrition, all women should be enabled to practice exclusive breastfeeding and all infants should be fed exclusively on breastmilk from birth to 4-6 months of age

By now you are probably thinking that this article is simply an adver tisement for the UK government's commitment to breastfeeding - I am sorry to say it's far from it. In fact it is an article about hypocrisy - but don't worry it is hypocrisy in the very best interests of the child.

Everyday babies are being denied the opportunity to breastfeed. In many cases their mothers are desperate to hold them close and give their baby the best start in life but they are being denied the

opportunity.

Who are these babies? They are the chosen few. The ones chosen by social services departments across the country to be taken into care because for one reason or another someone somewhere has deemed their mother unfit to look after them. In Manchester a mother has recently had her baby taken because she may cause him emotional harm at some point in the next few years - not will but MAY. In Southampton a lady faces having her new born baby taken because her ex-partner appears to have harmed one of her children in the past - she is illiterate so obviously an easy target for the Social Services department. These are only two of many hundreds of cases that happen every year. Is it fair in either of these cases that the baby should be denied breastmilk if that is what the mother wants to give? What harm could possibly arise, what crime have their mother's ever been convicted of? What damage have they ever done to their child?

So what happens when the mother asks for enough contact to properly feed her baby? Perhaps she is fobbed off being told it's impractical and she should choose a formula. Perhaps she is told she can express milk and feeds will be given as necessary. Perhaps she is told she can breastfeed during contact and that should be sufficient. Contact is often only a few hours a week - who will explain to the baby why they can not seek the comfort and warmth of their mother's breast at 2am or 7am? Who will explain to the baby that for a few hours a week they can have 'the real thing' and the rest of the time they'll have to rely on a bottle teat?

Do they understand that a mother's milk supply does not even start to settle until the baby is 6 weeks and in most cases expressing is inadvisable before this? Do they not know that foremilk and hindmilk are produced in perfect quantities for the baby and that expressed milk becomes mixed and cannot replicate this? Do they know that breastmilk contains ingredients that we have not yet even identified so can never be replaced in formula? Have they even heard of nipple confusion?

Here in the UK we have a state who despite all their outward insisting that breast is best are simply not adhering to it when they themselves 'care' for a child. The social worker in the guise of the state is denying a child what the state says is in their best interests and using the argument that it is 'in the best interests of the child'. Where will the contradiction end? Perhaps all of this has something to do with the 40% increase in adoption the government have decreed should be implemented across the country? Or perhaps I am just a cynic?

There is legal precedent that states:
'If the state, in the guise of a local authority, seeks to remove a baby from his parents at a time when its case against the parents has not yet even been established, then the very least the state can do is to make generous arrangements for contact, those arrangements being driven by the needs of the family and not stunted by lack of resources. Typically, if this is what the parents want, one will be looking to contact most days of the week and for lengthy periods. Local authorities also had to be sensitive to the wishes of a mother who wants to breast-feed, and should make suitable arrangements to enable her to do so, and not merely to bottle-feed expressed breast milk. Nothing less would meet the imperative demands of the

European Convention on Human Rights.'... 1

In my view even this is not enough - 'most days' should read 'every day'. The judgement is a step forward so why almost four years down the line are babies still being denied the chance to be properly fed?

I have had the privilege of breastfeeding my daughter every day for the first 21 months of her life. I have soothed her at night, calmed her when she's fallen or knocked herself, helped her through teething pains and watched her fall asleep at night. I know, from my own experience, that the state is right to promote breastfeeding, yet how on the other hand can they be so wrong in the best interests of the child?

References

1. (Citation: BLD 160403280; [2003] EWHC 850 (Admin).Hearing Date: 15 April 2003 Cour t: Administrative Cour t. Judge: Munby J.)