AIMS For a better birth...

Campaigning for Equal Access

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Donna Scott gives a petitioner's perspective of requesting donor breastmilk through the Scottish Parliament

Donor breastmilk banking is an idea whose time has come. As many countries see an upsurge in the number of milk banks and as organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the American Academy of Paediatrics endorse the medical benefits of donor breastmilk, it was inevitable that calls would be made for equal access for preterm and vulnerable babies in clinical need across the UK.

The speed at which we have moved from a situation in Scotland where there was no way of accessing donor breastmilk out of the Glasgow area at the beginning of 2011, to establishing the first nationwide donor milk bank service in the UK by 2013 is notable. This new development is due to a combination of expertise, drive and commitment from healthcare professionals within NHS Scotland and the existence of a pro-active voluntary sector who provide ongoing support for this flagship initiative. My role within this process was as a petitioner to the Scottish Par liament, which also helped to give the issue exposure in the local and national media.

In Scotland, healthcare is a devolved matter. Initially, I raised the lack of access to donor breastmilk with constituency and regional MSPs after contacting the Glasgow milk bank at Yorkhill hospital to arrange to become a donor. I discovered donations could not be accepted from out of the Glasgow area because there was no way of safely transporting frozen breastmilk. This also meant that donor milk could not be used by neonatal units outside the Glasgow area for the same reason. MSP Brian Adam raised this in the Scottish
Par liament with the Public Health Minister in January 2011 and, although there were no plans to increase provision, MSP Mark McDonald followed up the matter with my local health authority and wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Health on my behalf. He also arranged a meeting with my local health authority which we both attended, but the responses still fell short of a commitment to an equal provision of donor milk. It was at this point it was suggested that I think about petitioning the Scottish Par liament as a way of calling for evidence from various bodies, which would bolster the case for improving donor milk provision nationally.

I lodged the petition in March 2012. As the e-petition section of the Scottish Par liament website was being reworked, I chose to bypass the option to collect signatures in order that it could be looked at sooner so there was only ever one name on the petition – mine! I presented the petition to the Public Petitions Committee at Holyrood early in May 2012 and the decision was taken to explore the matter further. It was revisited on a further three occasions before finally being closed in April 2013 as parallel

developments within NHS Scotland meant that the local health authorities had reached agreement to proportionally fund the running costs of an expanded donor milk bank at the Southern General in Glasgow which would now serve the whole country.

The Scottish Parliament was a very effective avenue to take as a way of driving forward the issue of donor milk banking. The evidence base is growing, which made a very strong case for expanding access to donor milk on both medical and cost-saving grounds. Donor milk banking in Scotland was also operating with a 'postcode lottery', which local elected representatives were keen to address. It was also relatively easy to pursue this process by email at a time that suited me – my input was frequently provided in the evenings once my children were in bed, from the comfort of my own sofa! The resulting media coverage from the par liamentary questions and the petition also raised the profile of donor milk banking as stories were run in the national press and on television and radio. I also set up a Facebook page (One-Milkbank-For-Scotland) ear ly on in the process, which helped to raise awareness through sharing links as well as making contact with other organisations with similar interests.

My political campaigning as an individual would have been of limited effectiveness had there not been important 'behind-the-scenes' developments that were making the establishment of a nationwide service more and more feasible. Considerable financial investment was provided by the Yorkhill Children's Charity to fund equipment for the expanded milk bank at the Southern General and it was the establishment of ScotsERVS, the volunteer medical courier service, that finally meant that frozen donor milk could be collected from anywhere in Scotland, taken to Glasgow for processing and then sent out to neonatal units round the country at no cost to the NHS. In addition, the Glasgow milk bank was going above and beyond its remit in the year s before a nationwide service was secured by making surplus donor milk available to other local health authorities wherever possible, which also meant that demand from parents and clinicians had already begun to grow.

It's been hugely rewarding to have been part of the process that has seen Scotland become the first part of the UK to achieve equal access to donor breastmilk based on clinical need, regardless of geographical location. It would be fantastic to see the same achieved in the rest of the UK, and hopefully the success of the nationwide service north of the border will put appropriate pressure on politicians and local health authorities in other areas to find a workable solution to this soon.

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www.scottish.par liament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/
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