Breastfeeding Column

World Breastfeeding Week will be occurring from the 1st-7th August 2017. This is celebrated across the globe every year to encourage breastfeeding and improve child health, whilst commemorating the Innocenti Declaration signed in August 1990. This year observes 25 years of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) celebration with a key focus on working together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals which were linked to breastfeeding in 2016 (WABA 2017).

A key theme of this relates to the need for professionals to realise the difference they are able to make to mothers and breastfeeding sustainability. The health benefits of breastfeeding are widely known including protecting infants from disease and reducing mothers’ susceptibility to infection including some cancers. This is coupled with the environmental and financial benefits in which breastmilk is a renewable food, delivered in contrast to breastmilk substitutes without pollution, packaging or waste (WABA 2017).The World Health Organisation (2013) currently recommend exclusive breastfeeding until 6 moths and subsequent feeding until 2 years complemented by nutritious foods.

After the delivery of my daughter prematurely, I thought breastfeeding would be the most natural experience amongst all of the technological input that I had never envisaged. However I very much struggled with the experience of assisting my daughter to latch to the breast and positioning. I felt I had not only let my daughter down as a mother but as a health professional because I had spent many a day in community practice advising my clients that breastfeeding was the most natural bonding experience that a mother can have with their baby. For most Mothers this is correct, however for myself I appeared to struggle with the coordination of breastfeeding and being of an era in which my Mother did not breastfeed (she was in fact encouraged to bottle-feed), I was unable to gain the traditional support of families passing this knowledge between generations. I therefore needed to rely on the amazing support of health professionals including my health visitor. As with most new mothers you are keen for the best start for your infant and for this reason I would listen intently to every word of advice that was provided to me. Consequently the need for accurate information cannot be emphasised enough to reduce the risk of confusion and despondency (AWHONN 2015). Particularly as timely support and education are recognised to be crucial to sustainability of breastfeeding (Rayfield et al 2015). It wasn’t necessarily just learning about the techniques of breastfeeding but it was having someone there to listen to my emotional concerns and provide confidence in my ability as a mother.

The health visitor role in providing both practical and emotional breastfeeding support cannot be underestimated. However Marks and O’Conner (2015) have previously highlighted that health visitors often consider their influence towards breastfeeding as minimal. In a health visitors busy schedule of increasing caseloads and the need to meet targets, making time for a mother to be able to discuss their feelings regarding their breastfeeding experience could make a dramatic difference to sustainability. Integrated working with existing services such as peer supporters could also act as a means of health visitors promoting breastfeeding. This is supported by Dykes (2005) who identified that mothers felt gaining confidence was key to ensuring effective long-term feeding of their baby. This is particularly key as the most recent infant feeding survey (2012) identified initiation rates at birth within the UK at 81% and yet by 6 weeks only 27% of mothers within England continued to exclusively breastfeed. Therefore help from knowledgeable and empathic professionals could assist mothers to persevere and sustain Breastfeeding particularly when challenges may occur.

In summary health visitors possess a key position to support breastfeeding because of their work within the home and community. It is important that health visitors are able to recognise this role and the difference that they are able to make for service users such as myself. Therefore the promotion and support of breastfeeding needs to be continually kept at the forefront of the role aiming to promote health for both mother and infant.

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