



Pumping all the way

milk
milk



for both and in control. I just had to let nature do its job. But I had only been in Greece for a short time and was totally unprepared for the reality of the maternity hospitals here. I thought I would be able to have a natural birth. I ended up having a caesarean under general anaesthesia and being sent home from the hospital unable to breastfeed.

The baby was dehydrated and unable to latch on and the only piece of advice I received from the 'baby-friendly' hospital was to give her formula milk. Fortunately I was tenacious and stubborn enough to resist this advice and to manage to pump breast milk for my daughter for seven or eight months, although I never succeeded in getting her latched on to the breast.

A bad start

Like many first-time mothers, I believed breastfeeding was something that would happen naturally and without the need for help.

The reality was very different. When I woke up from the general anaesthesia I didn't know where I was or even who I was. Over the next couple of days I hardly fed the baby at all. I was sleepy and confused from the anaesthetic, in quite a lot of pain and still hooked up to a drip. I was in a room on my own and nobody told me when or how to feed the baby and I didn't register the fact that she wasn't latching on properly. I assumed she wasn't hungry. My head was full of the warnings of my friends that the hospital would try to coerce me into giving my baby formula milk, so I was reluctant to ask for help. Also, my room was often full of my husband's relatives, which wasn't very conducive to spontaneous breastfeeding. I had read so much about 'feeding on demand', that I thought the baby would tell me when she was hungry. Of course I hadn't considered how a general anaesthetic might interfere with the natural processes and reactions of a mother and baby.

On the part of the hospital, I received very little support, and no one asked how the feeding was going. The main problem was that every day different midwives, nurses and paediatricians came to see me and there was no continuity. Various members of staff told me 'she's losing weight...feed her more often'. I replied 'but she's not hungry and she cries when I try to feed her'. One doctor snapped at me 'how do you expect her to live if you don't feed her?' But no one recognised that there was a problem or offered to help me.

After three whole days I was sufficiently alert to realise that there was a serious problem and that the baby had hardly fed since she was born. She was beginning to look dehydrated and her

lips were dry and peeling. I remember suddenly realising late at night 'if I don't do something now, my baby won't be alive by the morning'. I was panicking and went to find a member of staff and at that point I didn't care any more if they gave her formula...I just wanted her to be okay. There was only one nurse on duty for the whole floor, but thank goodness she helped me. She gave Ariadne a bottle of formula and instantly her eyes watered and her lips went back to normal. It was such a relief. I felt truly awful. I had been starving my baby without realising it and it had gone unnoticed by the hospital.

The next day I was due to go home but the baby couldn't latch on and I didn't want to go home not being able to breastfeed her so I twice asked to see someone from the breastfeeding department who could help me. I waited for several hours, but no one came. Then they told me that I would have to vacate my room.

Back home

I had hoped that breastfeeding would go better in the comfort of my own home. Unfortunately things didn't improve and I was so upset that I couldn't do this basic thing for my baby. Very reluctantly I gave her a bottle of formula. I didn't know who I could ask for help. Fortunately I remembered that a good friend of mine who had recently come to stay with me had left her breast pump behind (rather intentionally, I think). In the instruction booklet it recommended waiting until the milk supply was established before starting to use a pump. I thought 'this is my only option if I want to succeed... I have to make it work'. I managed to

Where there's a will, there's a way

When I was pregnant with my first daughter, Ariadne, I was calm, serene and positive. I had read all the books about birth and breastfeeding and believed I was well-prepared



pump out a small quantity of milk and feed it to the baby. The sense of relief and success was enormous. I hadn't ever heard anything about someone breastfeeding a baby exclusively by pumping milk and I couldn't find references to it on the internet, but I resolved that this is what I would do. I pumped every three to four hours night and day until I established my supply. I saw the thick, yellow milk turn to thin, watery milk as my supply came in. I got more and more successful and efficient at pumping. I should add that it was a hand-operated pump, which at first seemed very hard work. I was thrilled that I was able to give my baby breast milk, and every bottle seemed so precious. I have heard it referred to as 'liquid gold', and that was exactly how I felt about it. After a while though I started to get exhausted, as I was waking up in the night to pump, then feed the milk to the baby, get the baby back to sleep, wash and sterilise the pump and bottle.

Finding support

After my initial success, this rather unorthodox form of breastfeeding became difficult to maintain because it was tiring and difficult to go out for any length of time. I didn't think I could do it for more than a few weeks. I didn't know any other mums at that time and it got quite demoralising not to have any support or encouragement, and to hear people telling me to give the baby a bottle, which would have been very easy to give in to. My husband was supportive but didn't like seeing me so tired. It was also a stressful time in our life as we were moving house and had no money. I didn't

have a support network in Athens, or access to a car. I was just on my own with the baby all the time. I couldn't find anyone to help me or show me how to latch the baby on. I tried phoning several support groups in the UK but without seeing me and the baby, they couldn't really help. I contacted La Leche League in Athens, and Patty was a great source of help and support over the phone. She promised to help me in person when I could get to one of the meetings.

Fortunately, when the baby was seven weeks old, and I was just about ready to stop pumping, I took her to a paediatrician for a check-up. Our paediatrician has modern ideas and is pro-breast feeding. He told me that I was doing a great job with the pumping and that I should definitely continue for as long as possible. This was what I needed to hear! Around the same time I went to see a lactation consultant to see what was the matter. She said that the baby had a 'disorganised suck' and that it could have been put right if I had had help at the beginning. She too strongly urged me to keep pumping. With this encouragement, I revised my goal to two months, then three, then six. When Ariadne was four months old I joined La Leche League. I had to take a bus, a metro, a train and another bus to get there, and it was midday in July...not the best conditions for a small baby. And when I got there and saw all the other mums successfully breastfeeding, I felt like fraud sitting there giving my baby a bottle (although it was expressed breast milk). But when I talked to the other mums and told them what I was doing, I received whole-hearted encouragement for what I was doing. That was very motivating, and actually it made

me feel like a success, not a failure.

Supply and demand

The first month I was giving the baby predominantly breast milk, usually with just one bottle of formula a day. In the second month, by frequent pumping, I managed to increase my supply to the point where I was able to give her my milk almost exclusively. I was pumping eight times a day and producing a litre of milk a day, which was very satisfying and motivating. I was able to see with my own eyes the laws of supply and demand: the more often I pumped, the more milk I got. And of course the opposite was true... after three or four months I started taking on a bit of work, which coincided with us moving house. That was a stressful, tiring and demanding time and my milk supply suffered somewhat. I continued to pump four times a day, and gave top-ups for the other feeds. It wasn't perfect but it was the best I could do in the circumstances. I told myself that every bottle of breast milk was one bottle more than I would have been able to give her if I had not succeeded with the pump.

I received a huge amount of encouragement from my good friend in the UK who had lent me the pump. In fact I couldn't have done it without her. She had told her NCT* group all about me and apparently I became quite renowned and they called me 'the supermum'! This was very nice to hear. When I went back to the UK for a visit, she took me to her group to introduce me to the other mums. This was a



great motivation to succeed. Finally, I stopped pumping when Ariadne was 7 or 8 months old. I had intended to go on for a year, just pumping in the morning and evening, since by that time I was also busy enough cooking for her. But when I cut back from 4 times a day to just 2 or 3, my milk supply dwindled so much that I got almost nothing. Pumping is not exactly the same normal breastfeeding. By then I was satisfied that I had done the best I could for my baby in the circumstances. I felt like the only mum who had ever breastfed her baby with a pump, but since then I have heard and read about many other cases, and I find that it is not uncommon at all.

* An organisation in the UK which gives support for childbirth and breastfeeding and other parenting issues

Second time round

Eight months ago I had another baby girl, Artemis. I did things differently this time and found a very kind and supportive doctor and midwife. My midwife helped me feed the baby shortly after the birth, even if it was against the policy of the hospital. This made a big difference of course. Over the next few days I still had quite a lot of trouble getting the baby latched on and it was very painful, but I had a lot of help and encouragement from my midwife, and this time I kept asking for help from the hospital staff. I was pleasantly surprised that they helped me much as necessary, as I had heard negative things about the hospital's attitudes towards breastfeeding. Obviously improvements are taking place. Nobody mentioned formula milk or chamomile tea!

I didn't have a caesarean this time which meant that physically it was much easier to breastfeed as I was able to pick the baby up, sit upright and move around. And of course I was mentally more alert. Now I can entirely see how it was unlikely that I would succeed in breastfeeding my first child in the circumstances. Even with my second daughter there were times in the first few weeks that I wanted to stop and give her bottles. But I am so glad I persisted. I managed to breastfeed Artemis exclusively for seven months. Now she is eating quite enthusiastically so I have cut down a bit on the number of feeds, but she is still an avid drinker of my milk. I intend to continue until she wants to stop.

It was interesting (but alarming!) to learn that

some people in my neighbourhood didn't seem to realise that it was possible to exclusively breastfeed a baby... 'but what about the top-ups?', they asked. Other questions included 'don't you give her chamomile tea?' and 'how come your milk didn't dry up when the baby reached six months?' What struck me the most was that the majority of the women I have spoken to wanted to breastfeed their babies, but most were unable to for any length of time because they didn't receive appropriate information or support. By far the most common comment is 'I wanted to breastfeed but I didn't have milk' (they then usually go on to say that their paediatrician advised feeding the baby every four hours and supplementing with formula. One woman even told me she was advised to give her newborn sugar water at night!).

So it seems to me that so many women want to breastfeed but their attempts are thwarted in many cases by the maternity hospitals and by inaccurate and unhelpful (though usually well-meaning) advice from paediatricians, relatives and friends. I don't suppose it would be difficult for all women to be properly informed and advised in hospital, or for public health information to be distributed by the government. Gradually things are changing in the maternity hospitals. On an individual level, women can get the support they need for breastfeeding, but they will have to look for it (and ideally before their baby is born) and it will not necessarily be automatic.

Kate Owen



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