

COMMUNITY PRACTITIONER

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Breastfeeding: what role do fathers play?

Welcome to this special June issue of *Community Practitioner*, which again this year has a breastfeeding theme.

Recently, I was reflecting on the figures from the NHS Information Centre Infant Feeding Survey, published every five years. The latest, published in November 2012, reveals a 5% increase in the proportion of babies breastfed at birth in the UK, rising from 76% to 81% (HSIC, 2012).

The results show an increase in initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding throughout the UK, with significant national differences consistently reflected in the figures. Exclusive breastfeeding at six weeks in England was 24%; 22% in Scotland; 17% in Wales; and 13% in Northern Ireland. England has the highest figures, and Northern Ireland the lowest at all the different measurement points.

These results reminded me of an excellent presentation by Roger Olley MBE, who set up Fathers Plus, an independent children's charity based in the north-west of England. Roger is passionate about developing men-friendly organisations and asked the audience a controversial question: 'Who owns the breast?' Is it the mother? Or the baby? The central theme of the presentation was that there are many and varying reasons why mothers decide to breastfeed – but the attitude of her partner may help to influence whether or not breastfeeding is maintained. Without her partner's support a lot of women find it difficult to sustain breastfeeding for the recommended period of time.

How a woman feels about her body, her (and her partner's) attitude to her breasts and a woman's feelings about breastfeeding all influence her decision to start or maintain breastfeeding. I wonder how many practitioners have discussions with parents about these feelings and attitudes?

Fathers have a role to play in breastfeeding, yet all too often they are excluded from these discussions. In 2011, the *Irish Medical Journal* published an article exploring how fathers' knowledge base and attitudes



influence breastfeeding practice. They found 82.1% felt that antenatal information was aimed at mothers only and that Irish fathers remained relatively uninformed regarding the benefits of breastfeeding.

If we seriously want to increase breastfeeding rates and maintenance across the four countries it might be helpful to focus on dads when discussing ways in which we can encourage mothers to take up breastfeeding – and stick to it.

Maggie Fisher

Maggie Fisher
Co-Chair, CPHVA Interest Group
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References

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