

MY OTHER LIFE

LORNA MCGREA

# Mothers' Milk

Ann processing milk at the pasteuriser

BY TESSA JOHNSTONE

Assistant Guide Leader Ann McCrea has the honourable job of collecting mothers' milk from around Ireland and delivering it to some of 'the country's tiniest citizens'.

Ann is one of the founders of Ireland's only human milk bank, Sperrin Lakeland Milk Bank in the Fermanagh Lake District, and now works as a coordinator for the bank.

Ann started out as a Health Visitor with a special interest in breast feeding. Nine years ago, she had an experience with a baby that provided the motivation she needed to start up a milk bank.

A baby was born in our hospital which developed life-threatening NEC [gastrointestinal disease Necrotizing Enterocolitis]. NEC can be prevented by the use of breast milk, but we couldn't get donor milk for this child. Large areas of his gut died and he needed extensive surgery to keep him alive. All his problems could have been prevented if we had a milk bank.'

Shortly after the experience, Ann got together a team of experts and set about starting Ireland's first human milk bank. Sperrin Lakeland Milk Bank has been

running for eight years now, and day to day work involves collecting and testing spare breast milk from new mothers around the country. The donors are screened just as blood donors are. All the milk is deep frozen and then transported by bus, train or postal service to the bank where it is tested, pasteurised and then tested again. The clean milk is given to babies around Ireland, and sometimes even England, who are premature or sick, such as babies about to undergo gut or heart surgery.

Breast milk is important for these vulnerable babies, as it is designed with their young bodies in mind. It is easy for them to digest, absorb and helps them fight infections.

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Ann says the job is challenging, as they are constantly seeking milk and different types of milk for special conditions. But it is also a rewarding role, especially when hearing how the milk has helped a very sick or premature baby recover.

Ann volunteers with the 1st Magheraculmoney Guides and says her

guiding connections have been a boon to her work.

'The Guide Leaders here are wonderful - most of them ring up after they have had their babies and offer to donate. Leaders with twins have even donated! And then in the spirit of guiding they often recruit their friends to help us.'

Guiding members have also been called upon to lend a hand in other ways too.

'Whenever we've had difficulty with getting milk to the bank, a call to the local Guide unit has often solved the problem with the milk being collected and even delivered to us. I've even had help storing milk at Lorne House when I've been there for training and had to pop away to collect milk.'

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO DONATE MILK?

You can find out more about Sperrin Lakeland Trust's Human Milk Bank by visiting [www.sperrin-lakeland.org/services/milk\\_bank.php](http://www.sperrin-lakeland.org/services/milk_bank.php) or calling **028 686 28333**.

There are other human milk banks all over the UK. To find your nearest milk bank visit the UK Association of Milk Banking at [www.ukamb.org](http://www.ukamb.org).