

BREASTFEEDING OTHER PEOPLE'S BABIES (well, sort of!)

"My name is Liz and I give breast milk to other people's babies."

I shouldn't joke, really, but in my opinion, Kate Garraway's recent Channel 4 programme Other People's Breast Milk misrepresented the practice of milk banking so badly that when I mention the fact that I am a breast milk donor to some people I feel a bit like I'm making a shocking confession.

As seems inevitable whenever breastfeeding hits the small screen (remember Channel 4's Extreme Breastfeeding, and don't even mention Little Britain's 'Bitty'), Garraway's recent "investigation" into wet nursing, cross feeding and milk-banking focused on the sensational and the extreme. It showed a grown man buying breast milk for his own consumption, a neo-natal nurse attaching herself to an electric pump for six hours a day and a woman who had never even been pregnant breast feeding her friends' kids on demand. What it didn't show was a perfectly normal breast-feeding mother expressing a few ounces a day to help keep the most vulnerable little people on the planet alive.

My second child, Orla, is now eight months old and for the past five months or so I have spent around ten minutes a day expressing milk. Some of it gets used for her breakfast cereal, some gets fed to her in a bottle when I'm not around, and some goes into the freezer in pre-sterilised bottles to be collected at a later date by one of the lovely people from the Cheshire and North Wales Human Milk Bank in Chester.

Once the milk is collected (about once a month for me, but organised to suit each donor), it's screened, pasteurised and fed through a tube, cup or maybe a bottle to babies often less than a quarter of the size of my own two at birth.

No NCT member can be unaware of the benefits of breastfeeding but to these premature or sick babies, it really is a lifeline. Their digestive systems are immature, or they may have particular health problems exacerbated by artificial baby milks. Obviously their own mother's milk would be the best possible food but early delivery or the stress of a medical crisis can prevent her milk coming in. Lack of physical contact with a baby who spends their days and nights in an incubator also makes it very difficult for many mothers of special care babies to keep producing milk. Donor milk is the next best option.

Like being a blood donor or giving to charity, the best reward for the donor is a sense of satisfaction in having done some good. However, I'm sure I'm not alone in also finding that the routine of regular expressing has both ensured that I have a good supply of 'spare' milk for our own use (especially I as prepare to return to work) and helped me maintain confidence that my (not particularly substantial!) breasts really can supply the food and drink that my baby needs. For me, there's something deeply satisfying about actually seeing the milk for myself.

Not all breast feeding mothers find it easy to express, of course, but for those who do, it really is worth considering becoming a donor. There are a few rules – you have to start while your own baby is under six months old; you can't smoke, drink more than two units of alcohol a day or consume large amounts of caffeine and all potential donors have blood tests to ensure that they don't carry certain infections such as HIV. You don't need to produce large amounts of milk – premature babies often start with less than 20ml a day and the motto of the United Kingdom Association for Milk Banking says it all - Every Drop Counts.

Find out more about becoming a donor, or perhaps making a financial contribution if you aren't breastfeeding at the moment:

Cheshire and North Wales Milk Bank, Countess of Chester Hospital: 01244 366416,
chestermilkbank.org.uk

United Kingdom Association for Milk Banking: 020 8383 3559, www.ukamb.org