



THE HON NICOLA ROXON MP
Minister for Health and Ageing

SPEECH

Australian Lactation Consultants Association National Conference
Friday 4 September 2009

Check against delivery

- Gwen Moody, President, ALCA;
- Dr Jenni James, Conference Convenor;
- Dr Lisa Amir, Conference Scientific Committee Chair;
- Angela Smith, President, International Lactation Consultant Association;
- Joy Burch MP, representing the ACT Legislative Assembly; and
- Ladies and gentlemen.

Introduction

Thank you and good morning – it is indeed a pleasure to be here today and speak about a topic of importance to mothers all over the country.

As parents we want to make the best choice we can in everything we do for our children. There are many choices mothers face on giving birth, and many sources of advice.

But when it comes to ensuring babies get the best food, breastfeeding is the best choice. It is the start in life that nature intended. It is the complete food, with all the nutrients a baby needs for normal growth and development.

It's a natural, healthy option for feeding infants, but as we all know, the early days can be difficult for both mother and baby and not all mothers are successful in breastfeeding.

Our goal is to offer all women the right support and information so they can give it their very best shot. If it doesn't work for them, that's of course ok, and it is important this choice is respected.

Breastfeeding research

There is an increasing body of research evidence that shows breastfeeding provides significant benefit to infants, mothers and society in general.

In fact, the National Health and Medical Research Council has noted a number of health benefits for the baby including a decrease in ear infections, gastrointestinal infections, a reduced prevalence of asthma and improved vision.

The NHMRC also recognises that the health benefits associated with breastfeeding confer economic benefits making breastfeeding one of the most cost-effective primary prevention measures available.

Australia's dietary guidelines actually recommend exclusive breastfeeding of infants until six months of age, with the introduction of solid foods at around six months and continued breastfeeding until the age of 12 months – and beyond, if both mother and infant wish.

However, a longitudinal study of Australian children conducted in 2004 found while 92 per cent of new borns were initially breastfed, by one week, only 80 per cent were fully breastfed.

The study also indicated a steady decline each month with only 56 per cent fully breastfed at three months and 14 per cent at six months.

So you can see there is still work to do in this area.

That is why we are here today, and that's why the Rudd Government is working to boost and promote breastfeeding in the community.

Rudd Government Breastfeeding Initiatives

In March this year, the Australian Health Ministers' Conference (AHMC) accepted the Commonwealth's invitation to develop and implement a National Breastfeeding Strategy.

This commitment is part of the Government's response to the House of Representatives report on the health benefits of breastfeeding.

The strategy will look at the protection, promotion, support, and monitoring of breastfeeding in the community. It will provide a framework for priorities and action for all governments to provide quality support and education services for parents and a coordinated and nationally consistent approach to research and data collection on breastfeeding.

It is anticipated that the strategy will also establish priorities and mechanisms for progressing certain issues raised in the 2007 Parliamentary inquiry into breastfeeding.

Progress may appear a little slow at times, but I can confirm for you the strategy is not too far away. It will go to Health Ministers at the November meeting, and be released before the end of the year – so we are almost there. Of course, as part of this process, members of the ALCA are being consulted in its development.

National Breastfeeding Helpline

Further, as part of the Rudd Government's commitment to breastfeeding, I recently launched an important initiative for the promotion of breastfeeding – the National Breastfeeding Helpline.

We have allocated \$2.5 million over five years to establish the Helpline. This will enable the Australian Breastfeeding Association to set up and maintain a 24-hour toll-free helpline to provide breastfeeding advice and peer-support for mothers and their families.

Breastfeeding mothers and their families can now gain access to expert support around the clock from any landline in Australia at no cost. Since its commencement, over 51,000 calls have been received on this helpline.

In addition, the Australian Government has also committed \$1.8 million over four years to develop and provide increased training and education opportunities for health professionals including lactation consultants.

This training is supporting the development and delivery of nationally accredited courses in breastfeeding that are recognised under the Australian Quality Training Framework.

The funding is also ensuring that volunteer counsellors staffing the National Breastfeeding Helpline receive comprehensive training – a Certificate IV in Breastfeeding – to equip them to support breastfeeding women and their families.

The National Perinatal Depression Initiative

Motherhood is not the easiest job in the world. For some mums, it is particularly tough. That's why we launched the National Perinatal Depression Initiative. This work aims to improve the prevention and early detection of antenatal and postnatal depression and to provide better care, support and treatment for expectant and new mothers experiencing perinatal depression.

The Australian Government has committed funding of \$55 million over five years for perinatal depression, which includes:

- \$30 million to state and territory governments to contribute to the roll out of routine and universal screening for perinatal depression, support services, and training for health professionals;
- \$5 million to *beyondblue* to undertake a range of perinatal depression activities, including community awareness raising activities; and
- an additional \$20 million to the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program to build the capacity of Divisions of General Practice to support better treatment for women with perinatal depression.

Maternity Services Reform

Our work in this area is a small segment of our wider focus on improving maternity services for Australian families.

While Australia is one of the safest countries in the world in which to give birth or to be born, there is always room for improvement.

The Australian Government recognises the importance attached to maternity services by the over 270,000 Australian women who give birth each year, and their families.

As such, we have responded to their needs with an historic \$120.5 million Maternity Services Package, which is designed to provide greater choice in the type of care and support mothers receive when having a baby.

The package includes changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme benefits for certain services provided or medicines prescribed by eligible midwives and nurse practitioners working in collaboration with doctors.

It also includes the expansion and improvement of the existing National Pregnancy Telephone Counselling Helpline to deliver a 24-hour, seven days a week telephone helpline and information service for women, their partners and families, to provide greater access to maternity information and support before and after birth.

This may include direction to the Australian Breastfeeding Association's 24-hour national helpline for callers seeking assistance with breastfeeding.

The package will be implemented progressively with new arrangements for midwives beginning from November 2010, provided the Opposition support the legislation in the Senate.

These changes are historic as I said. The Government is committed to improving maternity services, with our primary concern being to improve services for patients. I will be working with other health ministers to develop a National Maternity Services Plan to ensure coordination of maternity services across Australia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, part of the Australian Government's support for Australians during early parenthood is about promoting the value of breastfeeding and improving breastfeeding rates in Australia.

Through the excellent work of organisations such as the Australian Lactation Consultants Association, I am confident that the mothers and babies of Australia are in good hands.

The Australian Government's maternity services reforms are about enhancing services for Australian families as well as making sure that there is better support for the very well qualified health care professionals working in the sector such as you.

Finally, I'd like to thank the organisers for the opportunity to join you here this morning and I wish you well for the remainder of the conference.

Thank you.