

Profile

Hilary Myers, lactation consultant



Anita Johnson meets a woman who overcame personal obstacles to promote breastfeeding for others

With Government public health targets to raise breastfeeding, the decline in postnatal care and a society that struggles with the natural way to feed a baby, there is no better time to raise the profile of lactation consultants such as Somerset-based Hilary Myers, coordinator of Lactation Consultants of Great Britain (LCGB).

When we met at her home in the warmth of her kitchen, engulfed by the aroma of freshly baked bread, I found it free of the wealth of breastfeeding research that Hilary, a qualified midwife of 35 years, has become known for. "I always had an interest in breastfeeding and there was never any question that I wouldn't feed a baby," she says. "I had been breastfed, my mother had breastfed, my sister breastfed. The reality was that I didn't as I was unable to have children."

However, it wasn't until after a seven-year break from midwifery and the adoption of her first baby that she met a National Childbirth Trust breastfeeding counsellor who fired up her interest in the knowledge base of breastfeeding and she thought she'd like to go down the same career path.

Inspiration

Told by a friend that she could never achieve this as she had never breastfed, a period of personal grieving followed and the adoption of another baby with oesophageal reflux which she strongly believes could have been avoided had she been able to breastfeed. Together with the inspiration of Sue Saunders, a founder member of LCGB, and the powerful experience of reading *Breastfeeding Matters* by Maureen Minchin and later *The Politics of Breastfeeding* by Gabrielle Palmer motivated her to study to become a lactation consultant.

"I thought this would enable me to ratify my knowledge," she explained. "By coming from a knowledge and evidence base I



could overcome people's thoughts that I couldn't know about breastfeeding as I hadn't breastfed."

Accreditation

To attain certification as an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC), recognised as the gold standard in the breastfeeding world, candidates need to prove 1,000 hours of breastfeeding consultation time and 45 hours of education specific to human lactation in the last five years. They then sit the two rigorous three-hour exam papers, taken all over the world on the last day of July. The exam is a test of sound knowledge of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of human lactation, sociology and anthropology, ethical and legal issues, communication, counselling and problem-solving skills and dealing with breastfeeding challenges. There is a requirement to re-register

every five years by providing proof of continuing education and to re-sit the exam after ten years.

Being a lactation consultant, Hilary told me, can be anything you want it to be. "It's different in all parts of the world. Currently the Health Professions Council does not recognise the IBCLC qualification, although the LCGB hopes to be in dialogue with them about this issue very soon.

"Lactation consultants are often from a nursing, midwifery or medical background. It's all about promoting and supporting breastfeeding from an evidence base, similar to other breastfeeding counsellors but more clinical. It's about facilitating decisions and ensuring that the mother is supported. It's part of the continuum from pregnancy to childhood. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that breastfeeding reduces social problems, reduces child abuse, reduces crime and enables parents to

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parent instinctively which inevitably leads to a better society.”

I think I recognise a passion for what she believes in so strongly but I'm corrected. "I've learned to temper my passion," she says. "People can be scared. You can't push opinions."

Hilary goes on: "One of the biggest complaints from mothers about midwives and health visitors is the conflicting advice and a belief that they promote their own opinions about breastfeeding. I don't give advice, I give information. I explain to the mothers, 'how you choose to use the information is your choice and I will support you. However, if you want breastfeeding to succeed you need to follow the basic anatomy and physiology of breastfeeding'."

Raising standards

More and more primary care trusts are employing infant feeding specialists with the IBCLC qualification, in an attempt to raise breastfeeding standards. Hilary speaks of a definite need for specialist support, above and beyond the basic help which is patchy and doesn't meet many new mothers' and babies' needs. She truly believes that obtaining UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) status has to be the way forward. "We know that this not only ensures a good level of education among staff but helps prevent conflicting advice and leads to breastfeeding being a normal activity rather than a lifestyle choice." She continues: "The key has to be to ensure that there is sufficient, good-quality assistance available to everyone regardless of where they are, whilst acknowledging when more skilled

input is needed and knowing where to access it."

Individual support

As a practising midwife and one of two infant feeding advisors for a local primary care trust, Hilary supports fellow colleagues with up-to-date research to aid their clinical practice. She has trained to perform frenulotomy – a simple procedure to release tongue tie – and since, April, has held a weekly tongue-tie clinic. Independently she accepts private referrals with a range of difficulties from colleagues, desperate mothers and word of mouth.

Currently she is visiting the mother of nine-week twins born at 34 weeks' gestation who wanted to breastfeed exclusively. Issues included latching on problems with one twin, not being able to feed both together, nipple pain and concern around milk supply.

"I helped her improve the latch, discussed babies' feeding cues which she hadn't really been aware of and strongly encouraged her to allow them to feed more often and for longer. Within a week the whole picture was greatly improved." She shares in part an email received from the twin's mother a week later:

I just wanted to let you know that the hard work seems to be starting to pay off. The milk supply has definitely increased and the boys are latching really well using the new technique. We are still doing baby-led feeding, but the frequency has decreased and is much more manageable. Today the boys seem to be becoming more

settled. They are having some lovely awake settled time and some lovely interactions with us, which is the best thing ever!

Hilary retired as treasurer of LCGB to take over the role as coordinator. With this hat on she attended the International Lactation Consultant Association conference in the US in August. She says of the organisation: "They are a fantastic group of women. I have been able to network and attend both study days and conferences. The support is invaluable. Training as a lactation consultant is one of the best things I've ever done. It's given me confidence, made me feel more mature, professional and focused." **TPM**

Anita Johnson is a specialist support midwife (vulnerable groups), Wiltshire Primary Care Trust

■ For more information on training as a lactation consultant: www.lcgb.org



TIPS Awards Scheme - independent market research

Baby wipes were the first products to be tested by the TIPS Award Scheme when it was launched in March 2007. Since then, eight standard trials and six one-off trials have been completed. In total, 26 categories of products have been tested and 172 TIPS awards allocated. Only products that comply with the strict TIPS criteria can be submitted for a trial – this is part of a robust selection process which allows the TIPS testing programme to achieve a level of independence and impartiality that is second to none. Over 600 Parent Testers have joined the TIPS online community. When selected for a trial, Testers receive evidence-based guidelines which they must read before completing a detailed questionnaire. Testers' feedback is collated, evaluated and reviewed by Sharon Trotter. **Latest trial:** the results of the 2009 baby wipes trial have just been published online at www.tipslimited.com

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