

Response from Lactation Consultants of Great Britain LCGB on the Sheffield study on voucher incentives for breastfeeding, November 2013

A representative of the Lactation Consultants of Great Britain (LCGB) commented “We know that breastfeeding leads to healthier babies who grow into healthier adults. There is indisputable evidence that support from friends and family is crucial to increasing successful breastfeeding, but it can be difficult to reach families who live in communities where breastfeeding is rare or non-existent. We look forward to hearing the outcomes of this study and how mothers felt about this approach.” LCGB is the professional association of International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) in the UK. IBCLC certified lactation consultants hold an internationally recognised expert qualification in lactation and breastfeeding care.

The research based at Sheffield University, led by Dr Clare Relton, will study the feasibility and effects of providing shopping vouchers in areas where breastfeeding rates are very low, in an effort to raise the value of breastfeeding and to encourage women to seek support when they need it.

We know from the national Infant Feeding Survey that young mothers and those from the lower socio-economic groups are least likely to breastfeed and also have the poorest health outcomes. Since they and their babies have most to gain by breastfeeding, this is a public health issue and if they wish to breastfeed they deserve every possible encouragement.

With that in mind it is important to explore all possibilities to create a change in our culture, especially where breastfeeding initiation rates are low, below 40%, and where current initiatives often have minimal impact. LCGB wants all mothers and babies who wish to breastfeed to have the help and encouragement they need, with a good range of practical support to get started and continue. If the evidence from this study is such that the project should be expanded, and ultimately more babies will be breastfed, that is to be applauded, and may be the catalyst to much-needed cultural change.

The UK has a very long way to go to reach Department of Health and World Health Organisation recommendations of exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months. Currently only about 1% of babies in the UK are exclusively breastfed for six months.

This study is designed to run alongside existing provision of support for breastfeeding mothers. There are already programmes such as the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative in many of our hospitals, midwifery and health visiting services. In the community there are also networks of support involving peer supporters and the voluntary breastfeeding organisations such as the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers (ABM), Breastfeeding Network (BfN), La Leche League (LLL), and NCT. In addition to these, IBCLC certified lactation consultants fill many strategic and teaching roles as well as working directly with mothers and babies, both within the NHS and privately. We welcome every initiative to support and encourage breastfeeding. The practice and competencies of IBCLC certified lactation consultants are rooted in evidence and LCGB members look forward to hearing the outcomes of this pilot study.

References:

UK Government breastfeeding recommendations:

<http://www.unicef.org.uk/BabyFriendly/About-Baby-Friendly/Breastfeeding-in-the-UK/Government-recommendations/>

UK breastfeeding rates: www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/infantfeeding10final