

Mostly men disagree

Society discourages breastfeeding, says nurse

By WILMA BLOKHUIS

Special to the Champion

THE REASON SOME women resist breast feeding their babies isn't because they can't, it's because they won't. They've been conditioned by society — mostly men — not to. That was the message Maureen Wood, nursing supervisor and lactation consultant with the Halton Regional Health Department, brought to women (and a man or two) who filled the region's council chambers Friday afternoon.

In a presentation entitled *Truth to Myth and Myth to Truth*, Wood explored the reasons women give up on breast feeding or don't try it at all. For centuries, she said, women have submitted to the male view that the breast is a sexual object rather than a functioning part of the woman's body designed to provide the exact kind of nourishment for her child.

This view has permitted society to the point that breast feeding is considered animalistic and utterly gross and, as one male commented, "just like urinating in a public place." Supervisors in a Toronto mall in 1981 obviously felt the same way when they told a nursing mother to leave. The next day they were astounded when 40 mothers turned up and nursed their babies in the same mall.

Eradicating this attitude lies with women themselves. Research has already shown that women who successfully breast feed their babies are women who have enough self-esteem and enough control over their own lives that they can happily challenge anyone who denies them the right to feed their babies as they please.

This has not always been the case. Historically, breastfeeding has often been at the whim and call of social norms. For instance, wealthy women were expected to hire a wet nurse to suckle her child. It became a status symbol, said Wood.

"Many people believe that rich women didn't have a lot of children. That's not true. The rich could produce heirs so they bred like rabbits. They didn't breast feed because they were busy and didn't have time to do so."

Even women's clothing mirrored the status of the age in which mothers lived. Up until the 15th century, their clothing was loose to accommodate their suckling child. A century later, tight corsets "to give them the shape men liked" were in vogue. In 1900, busties and corsets gave women the fashionable hour — glass figure and, in 1925,



Maureen Wood

women bound their breasts to adhere to the fashionable no-breast look.

Besides being a social issue, breastfeeding can also be a political one since, according to Wood, women who breastfeed their babies do not become pregnant. This is known as lactation infertility.

Thus a country that decides it needs a greater population might also be the country discouraging breastfeeding and encouraging its counterpart, bottlefeeding. This does not work so well in Third World countries in which large baby

food industries encourage women to bottle feed (to make the companies richer) with the result that the country cannot support the population and its people find themselves diseased and desperate.

Historically, myths surrounding breast feeding were numerous and, looked at today, rather ridiculous. A publication put out by the Ontario Department of Health in 1930 warned new mothers that they should not expect their milk to start for four or five days after the birth of their child. They should only allow the baby five minutes and be fed every eight hours.

Breastfeeding, Wood pointed out, could not be done by the clock, (a concept of order left over from the 19th century) even though some doctors might advise mothers to do it that way.

In fact, doctors were not terribly well-trained in the finer aspects of breastfeeding, she noted. Instead of looking at ways of increasing milk in their patients, they turned easily to the much more "scientific" supplementation of formula.

At one time, when cows' milk became available, doctors used to devise their own recipes for imitating human milk for their wealthy patients. When the formula-producing companies took over, pushing formula with such slogans as "the most perfect substitute for human food," the medical profession bought the propaganda.

Doctors became dismayed, however, when mothers could easily mix the formula themselves and no longer needed their advice. The companies decided to woo the doctors and instructions were taken away, a move that brought the mothers back to their own milk.

There were other ways in which breastfeeding was discouraged by medical professionals. Even today, multi-national formula companies give doctors and new mothers samples of their products. Wood recalled a support group she attended in London last year at which "the formula companies outside were demonstrating their wares and they sponsored the workshop."

Wood contended that baby bottles contain more than formula. They represent status, an image of the emancipated modern mother who is too sophisticated to breast feed her child. This attitude, she said, is depriving many babies of the food made exactly to their specific requirements. It contains nutrients to build up the baby's immune system which is almost under-developed at birth. Wood stated mother's milk is indeed "best for baby."

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