

THE IMPORTANCE OF CELEBRATING WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK

A response to “Why I’m not celebrating World Breastfeeding Week” by Dr. Amy Tuteur

By Dr. Yulia Perch

August 5, 2015 – Dr. Amy Tuteur’s recent article in Time “Why I’m not celebrating World Breastfeeding Week” has stirred a great deal of controversy in the online community. There is no doubt that the topic of breastfeeding has to be debated openly with all sides having the opportunity to express their opinions freely, however, such discussions must be held in the spirit of kindness, sensitivity, and scientific objectivity. Sadly, many found Dr. Tuteur’s article highly polarising. While on a superficial level Dr. Tuteur aims to reduce the stigma faced by non-breastfeeding mothers, many readers, including myself, perceived her article as an assault against organisations that support women who are trying to make the difficult choice to breastfeed in our still highly “breast-unfriendly” social climate.

In Dr. Tuteur’s opinion, women who are unsuccessful in breastfeeding feel guilty because “it has been drilled into them that ‘breast is best’, and therefore, they are harming their beloved babies by formula feeding”. As a practicing physician, I have serious problems with someone labeling health promotion “a drilling”. She also asserts that the aim of the World Breastfeeding Week is “to extol mothers who breastfeed and to shame those who don’t”. In the same venue, Dr. Tuteur erroneously equates “cultural norm” with “moral imperative”, and is subsequently very unhappy with the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action’s vision of a world “where breastfeeding is a cultural norm”. What is ignored, unfortunately, is that “cultural norm” implies acceptance and normalisation of what is natural, while “moral imperative” implies a demand and a sense of righteousness – these are obviously two very different things.

It has also been claimed that the benefits of breastfeeding are trivial and research on breastfeeding is flimsy. However, UNICEF UK states that there has been significant reliable evidence produced over recent years to show that breastfeeding is a major contributor to public health and has an important role to play in reducing health inequalities even in the industrialised countries of the world. Breastfeeding reduces chances of infants getting asthma, allergies, obesity, SIDS, diabetes, cancers and so on whereas for mothers, it reduces her chances of getting diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, cancers, and even cardiovascular diseases. These are backed by evidence-based research which can be found here.

As a society, we should accept, indeed embrace, the breastfeeding practice as a norm. No woman ever should feel embarrassed or humiliated for the act of offering her breast milk to her child – no matter where, when, and how she chooses to enact that particular form of maternal love. Coming to such acceptance requires massive paradigm shift – on individual as well as on social levels.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that “exclusive breastfeeding is recommended up to 6 months of age, with continued breastfeeding along with appropriate complementary foods up to two years of age or beyond.” However, in preceding decades in the US, the practice of breastfeeding was practically eradicated, with only 20% of women initiating breastfeeding at birth. According to the CDC 2013 report, 76.5 % of women in the US attempt to breastfeed at birth now – a great improvement. Unfortunately, the majority of them do not succeed. Only 49% continue beyond the 6th month, and only 27% still breastfeed at the 12th.

Dr. Tuteur advocates passionately for women who were not successful at breastfeeding and those who have stopped breastfeeding, but has, through this article, misplaced the blame on “lactivists” (a term that now has negative connotations) who allegedly infuse feelings of guilt in non-breastfeeding mothers. However, instead of blaming breastfeeding activists, we should suspend the judgement and earnestly investigate causes for such low breastfeeding success rate first in our country, then globally. It is important to also realise that breastfeeding is a complex process that requires fine adjustment of reflexes on both the maternal and infant parts. It is a process of mutual attunement that takes time, patience, and quite a bit of effort, and we should strive to support mothers with fact-based information and attention.

The issue of working women is also an important consideration. The year 2019 marks both the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) 100th anniversary and the first centenary of international labour standards on maternity protection. The ILO recommends 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, but there is an obvious gap between this and the six months of exclusive breastfeeding recommended by WHO. In my opinion, WHO’s recommendation is great, but practically speaking, very few working women can accomplish this task not because they are bad mothers, but because they cannot spend enough time with their children to do so!

World Breastfeeding Week, through this year’s theme on “Women and Work – Let’s Make it Work!” aims to support working mothers (whether in the formal, informal and home-setting) in their effort to breastfeed their children. If there is any shame or pressure to be induced, it should be directed towards law-makers and employers who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the feeding function of a woman’s breast. Instead of misplacing blame on “lactivists”, why don’t we demand our legislators to guarantee maternity protection recommendations on leave, facilities, non-discrimination and so on? I bet our breastfeeding success rate would skyrocket then, with no guilt or shame.

In conclusion, after decades of patriarchal dominion in the West and the rest of the world, after generations of women receiving “breast drying shots” without any consent, after cultural degradation of a woman’s reproductive function, celebrating the World Breastfeeding Week is the least we can do to restore respect towards motherhood and the needs of a breastfeeding mother. Celebrating this week can and will do much more good than harm for everyone concerned with the future of our generation.

Dr. Yulia Perch is a practicing psychiatrist in Long Beach, California, specialising in Women's and Reproductive psychiatry. Dr Yulia advocates for breastfeeding from the psychological perspective as well, and sees nursing as not just a feeding process but also an essential component of bonding between mother and the child.