

As general practitioners with a broad experience of the health and wellbeing of families, it is clear that the benefits of maternity leave, emotional, cognitive and financial, far outweigh the costs. From an emotional perspective, postnatal depression, for example, exacts a heavy toll from young mothers whose legitimate role as carers is often under-acknowledged by society¹. As far as the physical benefits are concerned, this is well summarised in the review from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality¹: *“We found that a history of breastfeeding was associated with a reduction in the risk of acute otitis media, non-specific gastroenteritis, severe lower respiratory tract infections, atopic dermatitis, asthma (young children), obesity, type 1 and 2 diabetes, childhood leukemia, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and necrotizing enterocolitis. ... For maternal outcomes, a history of lactation was associated with a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, breast, and ovarian cancer. Early cessation of breastfeeding or not breastfeeding was associated with an increased risk of maternal postpartum depression. ... A history of breastfeeding is associated with a reduced risk of many diseases in infants and mothers from developed countries.”*

Mothers who try to combine breastfeeding and work face considerable obstacles and relatively few succeed^{2 3}. There is ample evidence to support the benefits for babies and infants of sustained reliable contact with their mothers during the first 18 months of life. As well as the obvious physical advantages in terms of breastfeeding⁴, babies and infants do best when they have their mother available as they acquire skills of engaging and relating within a secure environment, defining boundaries, regulating affect, etc. The early years are vital because the early development of these abilities and skills lays the groundwork for secure childhoods and successful lives⁵. Mothers are also engaging in a unique relationship that, under ideal conditions, promotes their psychological wellbeing as well (assuming that this role is appropriately acknowledged by family, friends, work colleagues and society at large). Mental health problems among new mothers are nevertheless common and there is evidence to suggest that the origins of such problems in the mother lies in their own infancy and childhood. The

¹ Dennis CL & Ross L. (2005) Relationships Among Infant Sleep Patterns, Maternal Fatigue, and Development of Depressive Symptomatology. *Birth* 2005; 32:187–193

² Ryan AS, Zhou, W, Arensberg MB. The effect of employment status on breastfeeding in the United States. *Women's Health Issues*, 2006; 16: 243-251.

³ Gatrell CJ. Secrets and Lies: breastfeeding and professional paid work. *Social Science & Medicine* 2007; 65, Issue 2, July 2007, 393-404

⁴ *Breastfeeding and Maternal and Infant Health Outcomes in Developed Countries*, Structured Abstract. April 2007. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD. <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/tp/brfouttp.htm>

⁵ Barlow J, Coren E, Stewart-Brown SSB. Parent-training programmes for improving maternal psychosocial health. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2003, Issue 4. Art. No.: CD002020. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD002020.pub2.

whole question of mother-infant wellbeing is therefore a recursive one. There is evidence from a range of studies to suggest that maternal psychosocial health can have a significant effect on the mother-infant relationship, and that this in turn can have consequences for both the short and long-term psychological health of the child.

As a psychotherapist in general practice, one of us has observed over many years that the most intractable and damaging psychological problems seen in children, adolescents and adults are almost invariably related to impaired early emotional development, linked with family dysfunction or breakdown and/or with mental health problems in the mother. For these reasons we strongly support the provision of maternity leave as a way of supporting mothers, families and children, and of relieving the social and economic costs of psychological impairment associated with early deficits in mother-infant bonding and care.