

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into perinatal services

Warrnambool — 11 October 2017

Members

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Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Roma Britnell

Dr Rachel Carling-Jenkins

Ms Chris Couzens

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Witness

Ms Alexandra Lenehan.

The CHAIR — Welcome.

Ms LENEHAN — Thank you for letting me address you. This is going to be another one in support of breastfeeding and the breastfeeding centre. I am one of the committee members, so I am very pleased to hear all the positive stories that come from that, but I also want to tell my own story and how I got to be involved with it. I think one thing that is really interesting for me today is to hear all these issues that are flagged: the care for mothers, postnatal depression and I am not sure if it was mentioned before, but we also talk a lot about obesity and general health issues, and we do know that breastfeeding is a preventative factor for a lot of these things. Yet, as we have seen and heard, the support is not there, and it is not acknowledged as such an important, vital part of actual preventative health care.

In my own case, I moved here from Germany nine years ago now, on my own, to live here. I lived on a dairy farm for seven years, so quite an isolating lifestyle — Roma will know all about it. We had lots of trouble actually conceiving a child, so lots of infertility issues. We had a stillborn son before we finally had our daughter two years ago, so I was very much at risk. I have to say the team at the hospital was great in looking after me, both with my stillbirth and with my daughter. I mean, there is always room for improvement. Generally it was very empathetic and, yes, it was fantastic. It helped me to build up a support network to know where to get help, so I think it is very important that these resources are not cut.

For me, though, living out of town, going into town with a newborn was always a day trip. I live about 30 to 40 minutes away, so with a newborn as a first mother without family support that is quite a big trip. For me, going to the breastfeeding centre was great because I knew I could go there, it was warm and there was help. For me, again, not having your mum when you have just had your first baby is quite difficult. For me it was really important having that option. I knew there was a safe place for me to go to. There were other people there. Barb helped me connect with the ABA as well, which was fantastic, and then there is the usual dance that you have as a mother that you just sign up for. Everyone apparently has these things: ‘Is my baby feeding enough? Is everything going well?’.

I have had a fairly easy breastfeeding journey; I was very lucky with that, but even I had doubts, although there was no indication to really have doubts, so I can only imagine how hard it would be for someone who actually has issues and has been told their baby is not thriving but then not having the support to say, ‘What can we do about it?’. Formula seems to be a quick fix. I think sometimes while a great amount of health services are available, maybe we need to look into actually connecting these better, so making sure that we are actually working hand in hand and connecting people with the right people.

We have a fantastic location consultant in Warrnambool, and I think it is important to work together to just provide support, because breastfeeding is a very complex issue and we have heard how difficult it can be for a lot of women. I was lucky that it was easy, but I also believe that my mental health was greatly improved by being able to breastfeed and having that support — somewhere to go, someone to ask. We know that the hormones released through breastfeeding actually help with depression and are a preventative factor. These things do not seem to get publicised or advocated for very much. Then we have the stigma of every time we say something good about breastfeeding we are shaming mothers who are formula feeding. From a mother’s perspective I am very proud. I am still breastfeeding my two-and-half-year-old; I am quite proud of that, but I do not feel I can actually share that with people, because every time I say something positive or say, ‘Look how great it is!’, I get slammed, ‘Oh, so I’m a bad mother because I’ve given them a bottle?’. ‘No, this is not what I said’. So my feeling is there is a lot of insecurity and guilt, maybe because a lot of mothers do not meet their breastfeeding goals. They did not have the support, so they had to come to terms with not being able to do what they really wanted to do, and that makes everyone defensive.

I think with the stigma we really need to work on a cultural level to just make sure it is okay. If you meet your goals and you are happy with your decision, that is fantastic, but often it is actually a lack of support, not a lack of ability to breastfeed, and I think that is something that is a shame.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is something we are hearing very commonly. Thank you for your time, Alexandra.

Ms LENEHAN — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.