

## Breastfeeding is good business

Last week, a B.C. human rights tribunal ruled that employers must give breastfeeding employees the time and opportunity to nurse at their desks or elsewhere. Tonia Jurbin has adapted the following commentary from a proposal she prepared for her employer at the request of the employment equity coordinator while she was on maternity leave. Her medical reviewer was Dr. Verity Livingstone of the Vancouver Breastfeeding Clinic.

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Babies and their mothers aren't the only ones who benefit from breastfeeding. Employers, too, can reap the rewards.

Last week, Michelle Poirier, a policy adviser to the B.C. ministry of agriculture, made history when a B.C. human rights tribunal ruled that employers must give breastfeeding employees time and opportunity to nurse. It was the first ruling to say that refusing to accommodate breastfeeding women constitutes discrimination on the basis of sex.

While many employers are progressive in such matters, unfortunately many more will view this ruling as a costly, disruptive nuisance. They can overcome some of their anxieties, however, by understanding the benefits that breastfeeding mothers bring to their organizations.

But first, employers should remember that not all women get pregnant. Of those who do, not all choose to breastfeed. Of those who breastfeed, not all continue when they return to work from maternity leave. And they might need to nurse or express milk only for a few months because many of the feedings can be kept up outside working hours.

While it is not known how many women attempt to continue breastfeeding when they return to work after their maternity leave, it is known that 80 per cent of women in B.C. breastfeed their babies.

Among the ways employers benefit by co-operating with a lactation program are:

- Breastfeeding women need less time off work to care for sick children because infants who are breastfed are healthier than other babies.
- Women have less anxiety about returning to work if they can still take care of their children's needs.
- Debilitating illnesses such as breast cancer, ovarian cancer and osteoporosis are reduced if women breastfeed.
- The breastfed generation will be a healthy workforce for the future.
- The availability of corporate lactation programs can help to attract valuable employees.

Although Canadian statistics are hard to come by, corporate lactation programs have been successfully implemented in the United States. American case histories have shown that where programs have been implemented, employers enjoy a \$1.50 to \$4.50 return for each dollar invest-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION FROM ORIGINAL ARTWORK BY BARRIE MAGUIRE

### WORKPLACE NEEDS FOR NURSING WOMEN

- The most important is simply a private, clean room with an electrical outlet and a door that locks. The room should be dedicated to this use to avoid interruptions and distractions.
  - A comfortable place to sit.
  - Access to a nearby sink and cleaning supplies.
  - A table or counter space.
  - A telephone.
  - A hospital-quality electric breast pump. (Hand pumps are considerably slower.)
- Other desirable amenities could include posters of breastfeeding mothers to make the room inviting, a footrest and nursing pillow, and a divider if the room is designed for more than one user.

fortable during the workday.

The U.S. figures would differ from B.C. figures since many of the health-care services offered by programs there are included in our health care.

No matter where it is, though, a corporation lactation program provides a supportive environment for mothers returning from maternity leave to continue to breastfeed. Such support is primarily given by providing the facilities to nurse or express and store breast milk, thereby allowing the child's caregiver to feed the infant with breast milk while the mother is at work.

In the past, the options for women who continued breastfeeding after returning to work were limited. They included: feeding their daughter or son during breaks if someone brought the baby to the workplace; going to the caregiver's at lunch; or manually expressing milk, usually in a washroom stall.

The obvious disadvantages made continued breastfeeding difficult, if not impossible, for working mothers. I know that my work was affected by the negative reactions I encountered when I returned to work seven months after giving birth to a daughter. I also had to deal with the logistics of finding a spot where I could pump without being distracted.

At first, I had to use a bathroom stall to express my milk.

(To give due credit, my employers have since built and equipped a wonderful room, complete with an easy chair, posters, refrigerator, sink, hospital pump and cordless phone. They have also retained a lactation consultant who contacts all women on maternity leave and sends a personal pumping kit and carrying case if they decide to continue to breastfeed.)

Cost estimates for a private room with its amenities can be prepared quickly. It is important to include the value of the space that will no longer be allocated for work. Some allowance might be needed for additional plumbing and refrigeration.

If the employer decides to implement a formal program, it is important that managers, in particular, and the rest of the staff understand that many of the measures are not only required by law now, but are supported by senior management. This may seem obvious, but my experience has been that negative reactions — usually from childless women — can cause excessive stress. That's exactly what a woman with a job and one or more children does not need when she returns to work. □

ed. These returns are realized by the mother's reduced absenteeism and increased productivity that results from not worrying about her baby. Productivity is also improved because the woman is not physically uncon-