

# Supporting the Breastfeeding Mother through Evidence-based Practice

Interview with Prof Lawrence M Gartner, Prof Emeritus,  
Depts of O/G & Paediatrics, University of Chicago



Q. Prof Gartner, babies in Singapore are quite safely fed infant formula, and seem to thrive quite well on such alternative feeding. Are there still pressing reasons why doctors should encourage and protect breastfeeding?

Prof Gartner: Even in the most developed countries with safe water and milk supplies, hundreds of well-designed studies have demonstrated that breastfeeding provides very significant improvements in infant health and development. Virtually all infectious diseases are reduced in frequency and severity; intellectual development and school performance are better in breastfed infants. The greater the duration of breastfeeding, the greater the benefits. Many of these benefits, such as prevention of ear infections and asthma, persist well beyond the period of breastfeeding and well into adolescence. Breastfeeding also provides very important benefits to maternal health, including reduction in some cancers.

Q. How do you see obstetricians and gynaecologists playing a role in promoting and supporting breastfeeding?

Prof Gartner: Obstetricians are very important in providing pregnant women with the critical information that they need about breastfeeding, including the benefits to mothers and infant and the techniques for successful breastfeeding. Immediately after delivery, obstetricians also have a critical role to play in the delivery room in insuring the prompt initiation of breastfeeding.

Q. And the role of paediatricians and family physicians?

Prof Gartner: Paediatricians and other

physicians providing care for the newborn and the older child ensure the maintenance of successful breastfeeding. They need to evaluate the breastfeeding, provide advice to the mother and handle problems that occasionally arise in the course of breastfeeding. In most parts of the world, the major problem is that the duration of breastfeeding is far too short. The paediatricians and child care provider can be very important in encouraging the mother to continue the breastfeeding into the second year of life and even beyond that time to ensure that the infant and the mother get the maximal advantage of breastfeeding and lactation.

The family physician has the great advantage of being able to be both obstetrician and paediatrician. This combined role ensures continuity from the prenatal preparation through the delivery and immediate newborn period and on into older infancy and early childhood.

It is very important that all three of these specialties of medicine be very well trained in breastfeeding and lactation to ensure optimal health and development for the infant.

Q. Mothers may choose to breast-feed their babies; but are there any real medical advantages for them to exclusively breastfeed?

Prof Gartner: Research is increasingly demonstrating that exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life provides greater benefits to the infant than mixed feedings and shorter duration of breastfeeding. Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months usually results in longer duration of breastfeeding, to the benefit of both mother and baby.

Q. How relevant is breastfeeding to the treatment of premature and critically ill neonates?

Prof Gartner: In most neonatal intensive care units throughout the world, human milk is being used as the standard of care. Human milk has been shown to significantly protect the high risk infant against serious infections and to improve development, including a higher IQ when the child is of school age. ■

#### Editor's note

Prof Gartner would be the keynote speaker in a seminar organised by the BMSG (Breastfeeding Mothers' Support Group, Singapore) on Saturday 19 August 2000. He is a paediatrician with special research interest in bilirubin metabolism, neonatal jaundice, human lactation and breastfeeding, and jaundice in breastfed infants.

The BMSG is a mothers support group that counsels many mothers on its Hot-line 3393558, and has shared their anguish over the premature termination of their breastfeeding because they, or their babies have had some medical problem. The common approach to treatment has often been for them to stop, or interrupt their breastfeeding, without adequate advice or support for them to do otherwise. This seminar is organised in the hope that all doctors would support mothers in breastfeeding.

#### SUPPORTING THE BREASTFEEDING MOTHER THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Keynote speaker:  
Prof Lawrence M Gartner, Prof Emeritus,  
Depts of O/G & Paediatrics, University of Chicago

Date : 19 August 2000, Saturday  
Venue : COMB Auditorium  
Time : 2.00 - 5.45 pm

#### Programme:

- Physician's Role in Breastfeeding Initiation
- Human Milk and the Premature Baby
- Jaundice in the Breastfed Infant
- Maternal Infections and Breastfeeding
- Maintenance of Breastfeeding through the first and second years

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