

Breastfeeding with Breast Cancer

Annette Littlejohn

Six months ago I received the devastating news that I had breast cancer. I had been concerned at some lumpiness in one of my breasts which did not feel quite normal, but because it was not a solid single lump like a pea, I had not been unduly worried. I had to wait 2 weeks for a mammogram. Even getting a mammogram at all had proved rather difficult in the past. I consulted my doctor three months previously about having one and the doctor rang to enquire. When they heard that I was still breastfeeding they said to wait six months until after I had weaned, claiming that the mammogram would simply appear "milky". A couple of years prior to that I had also enquired about a mammogram and on that occasion was told I would need to wait a year after weaning. Fortunately my doctor this time asked to speak to the radiographer personally and was told that they would give me a mammogram. Apparently the usual guidelines regarding breastfeeding are for women breastfeeding young infants. In this case I was breastfeeding a five year old child.

The mammogram, although uncomfortable, was not painful and I noted that the equipment had been improved since my last experience. I was told that two suspicious areas had shown up and they would do an ultrasound straight away. The radiographer said I should have a fine needle aspiration of the lumps. This was booked in for the next day. I could tell from the attitude of the doctor who performed this procedure that he too was worried. Still I didn't really believe that it was cancer, thinking instead that it was more likely to be as a result of breastfeeding an older child.

I received the results that it was cancer within 24 hours. I had previously spoken to women who said that when they found out they had breast cancer they found the wait for the operation to be intolerable; that they just couldn't wait for the cancerous breast to be taken off. My own experience was completely different. Although I accepted I had cancer (to the extent one can accept this news) I also perceived my breast to be healthy as well. I was breastfeeding normally and bringing my daughter both nourishment and nurture. Hence I was able to use the time of waiting in a positive manner, getting in touch with people and finding out information.

At the appointment with the surgeon we decided I would have a mastectomy and all of the lymph nodes removed. One of the lymph nodes had looked "dodgy" on the scan and the surgeon thought it was very likely the cancer had reached there. I had an appointment with a breastcare nurse who warned me that chemotherapy was highly likely and possibly radiotherapy as well. I was advised to regard the whole of the next year as a time for treatment and recovery. I knew that chemotherapy meant I would have to wean. However, a mum from my Group remembered an article in *Aroha* [Vol.9 No.2] about a woman who had breastfed safely while undergoing radiotherapy, and reading this article brought me much comfort and helped me feel better informed.

I was determined not to wean until I absolutely needed to. My daughter was struggling with settling into school and needed all the comfort and security she could get. Furthermore she was of course most anxious because of my health predicament. The hospital staff were very respectful of my desire to breastfeed and were careful with medications, although I did feel the need to constantly remind new staff as they came on. People simply assumed that I was not breastfeeding.

A week after the operation I saw the surgeon for the results. I had to wait a couple of hours to get in. I felt exhausted and ill. Then once in the room I had to wait again. But an unexpected feeling of utter peace and calm came over me in there. And shortly afterwards I received the news that the cancer had not gone to the lymph nodes so I did not need chemotherapy, and the margins around the surgery were clear so I did not need radiotherapy. I might want to consider Tamoxifen however, a drug which would reduce my risk of the cancer recurring. I think I went into greater shock with this good news than I had when hearing the diagnosis of cancer. Subsequent

appointments revealed that my chance of recurrence was 33 percent so Tamoxifen was highly advised. I asked for time to think.

And then I asked for more time to think! You see, Tamoxifen with all its purported benefits meant that I would need to wean my daughter. How could I do that when she was even more dependent on breastfeeding now that she was facing greater insecurity in her life than she had ever known? For however careful we had been to talk sensitively in front of her, visitors inevitably started talking about people they'd known who had survived or died.

As well, I had other reservations about Tamoxifen as the best option for me. After much research I decided not to take this drug. My daughter who had known that she might have to wean was highly relieved.

I was convinced that if I did not take Tamoxifen I needed to do something to help myself, so I proceeded to make changes to my diet and exercise patterns and to take nutritional supplements which were compatible with breastfeeding. I was keen to try natural progesterone cream which was considered an alternative medicine but which I had read much about. My search for someone to accurately prescribe this for me led me to a GP in Wellington with whom I was able to have phone consultations. She organised many tests for me which showed many deficiencies in minerals and vitamins and she advised me to have my amalgam fillings replaced. As I write this I am waiting for a dental appointment for this procedure. I am spending the weeks I have to wait researching about mercury and learning about the different forms of detox used to minimise the effects of mercury in the body. I am feeling daunted. And I am in much grief. For because of the detox procedure I shall have to wean Tabitha. And I have not told her yet.

There are very few people I can talk to about this. The vast majority of people think I'm mad anyway to still be breastfeeding. There are few people indeed who can understand. Of course I know she will survive being weaned at this age. Of course I know how lucky she has been to still be allowed to breastfeed. Of course I know all about the huge benefits of the years of breastfeeding. But my heart aches for her and for me. I have always regretted bribing my son to wean when he was five and a half years old. I was struggling with tandem feeding and very, very tired. He was not ready to wean. It had been my desire to allow Tabitha to wean when she was fully ready to do so. I knew instinctively that I would have been ready then too. I am not ready and nor is she.

There are some messages I really want to pass on to you. Many people struggled to accept I could have cancer because of my continuous ten years of breastfeeding. But it needs to be remembered that while extended breastfeeding reduces one's risk of breast cancer it does not eliminate it. And from what I've read the risk reduction may pertain more to women who are younger when they have their first child; I was 37.

Most lumps are not breast cancer. Breastfeeding can at times result in lumps in the breast for various reasons – I had a benign one soon after the birth of my daughter, so do not be alarmed if you do feel a lump. I had always been too afraid to check for lumps myself. I have spoken to many women who have felt the same. But now I truly know the reality that a lump found sooner can be dealt with so much more effectively than a lump found later.

I never accepted the verdict that I needed to wean without checking it out with La Leche League first. LLL has people specialised in providing information on the effects of drugs upon breastfeeding. Most times there will be an alternative drug which is safe.

And finally, never underestimate the value of breastfeeding your baby or older child. Breastfeeding into childhood will not suit all mums or all babies either. But for me it will remain one of the most treasured memories I have of my time with my children. And I regard it as indeed my greatest gift to them. And I shall fight to continue to breastfeed until the last possible moment. And then my daughter and I shall grieve together.