

Milk matters: infant feeding and immune disorder

Minchin MK. Newcomb, Victoria: Milk Matters Pty Ltd, 2015. 819 pages. ISBN 9780959318319

When I joined MIDIRS in 1990, Maureen Minchin was already a recognised author on breastfeeding and as well known in this field as other luminaries such as Sheila Kitzinger, Gabrielle Palmer and Mary Renfrew. Her books, *Food for thought: a parent's guide to food intolerance* (1982) and *Breastfeeding matters: what we need to know about infant feeding* (1985), were milestones in the battle with formula manufacturers and for many years the latter was required reading for anyone working in human lactation.

In this comprehensive new book, she brings together and develops the themes of these books, and others published later, with the information we now have available on the effects of *not* breastfeeding, not only on the first generation of formula-fed babies but on the subsequent descendants of those babies. It is not a light read, being over 800 pages long with a bibliography of 47 pages, but nevertheless, it is written in a very accessible style which is not onerous to read, despite its many many references. This is nothing if not evidence-based!

It is in fact three books which are complete in themselves. Book one is entitled *The milk hypothesis, immune disorder and allergy epidemics*, and explores in detail how allergy is understood today and what contributes to it. Minchin's summary describes the necessity of human babies receiving a species-specific food from birth in order to meet their complex nutritional, neurological and immunological needs.

Book two is entitled *Creating a 'perfect' breastmilk substitute: reality and myths*. This encompasses the entire history of formula milk, from its inception as condensed or dried milk,

which killed most babies given it, to the modern-day product and every stage along the way. It is a story of commercial success, dubious advertising and marketing standards and much experimentation with ingredients. The chapters on what's in formula milk take up over 100 pages — it's not called 'formula' for nothing, although few people seem to think about that too much these days. This book also includes the drive for regulation of manufacturers, the WHO International Code (1981) and the advent of follow-on milks which arose from the ban on advertising of formula for babies under six months.

Book three, *Crying out for attention*, would be useful for parents as well as health professionals, addressing as it does the issues that parents commonly face, especially if they have a hyper-reactive baby — persistent crying, colic, reflux, food intolerance, what to do? It also discusses when and how and what to give with regard to the introduction of complementary foods.

It is hard to review a book of this magnitude and complexity without going into too much detail (which would require many pages in itself!). I certainly feel it is the culmination of one woman's lifetime passion on the long-term adverse effects of breastmilk substitutes on our society, which we ignore at our peril. On her own admission it is a mix of politics, science and practical advice on a huge scale, but the case she makes is entirely convincing and is backed up with evidence from many and varied sources. However, one has to wonder how it will be received by today's media especially, sadly, some female journalists who seem

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to take such delight in denigrating breastfeeding whenever possible! Perhaps with the research now being done into the fascinating subject of epigenetics, which is showing how gene expression can be altered by outside influences such as food, we can begin to reverse society's views on the value of breastmilk.

This book should be read by all public health policymakers from the powerful to the smallest regional health authority, and should be available for all health professionals dealing with women and babies to dip into. It is a formidable resource.

References

- Minchin MK (1982). *Food for thought: a parent's guide to food intolerance*. St Arnaud, Victoria: Alma Publications.
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- World Health Organization (1981). *International code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes*. Geneva: WHO.

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