

March 26, 2009

Members of the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) have read with interest “The Case Against Breast-Feeding” by Hanna Rosin. We respect Ms. Rosin’s personal opinions and observations regarding her breastfeeding experiences and appreciate her historical overview of the history of infant feeding. We must disagree, however, with the premise of the article that the benefits of breastfeeding are not scientifically validated, and therefore, what Ms. Rosin describes as the “burden of breastfeeding” often outweighs its value.

The online review of the medical literature described in the article misrepresents the evidence on a critical issue for both women’s and children’s health. Ms. Rosin claims that many studies did not show significant benefits of breastfeeding, but her online research appears to have missed more recent information. In 2007 the DHHS Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality published an Evidence Report conducted by independent experts who reviewed only high quality studies. The report found that a lack of breastfeeding was associated with a statistically significant increased incidence of several acute and chronic diseases affecting both mother and child.

Inconsistent associations are common in medical research—study designs may vary widely, and it is difficult to design a “perfect” study, especially when dealing with human subjects. It is unfortunate that the comprehensive analysis of medical experts is so often boiled down to a “sound bite” on the latest newsworthy twist in health research. Non-profit organizations like USBC exist to serve as a collective expert voice, distilling the best, evidence-based information and advocating for support for families without the bias of profit-seeking motives.

Feeding formula (or breast milk) from a bottle is seen as an expedient way to feed infants, and direct breastfeeding may be perceived as a type of bondage, as described by Ms. Rosin. Yet there are many women who would argue that breastfeeding is easier and *less* time-consuming than washing and sterilizing bottles and buying and preparing formula. Similarly, many would argue that breastfeeding is a way to connect with their baby in a way that both nourishes *and* nurtures. As a society, we ought to value the breastfeeding experience not only for the health benefits imparted in a mother’s milk, but also as an way for mothers and babies to enjoy these emotional benefits in a way that can fit into the lifestyle of the 21st century mother. A mother provides individually customized breast milk designed to enhance her child’s immunologic, developmental, and nutritional status. This is not the same as processed formula, in which the contents of every can are identical. We perform a disservice to American families by perpetuating the myth that feeding human infants artificially created formula is equivalent to breastfeeding.

Despite the provocative title of her article, Ms. Rosin subsequently stated on *The Today Show* that she is not actually against breastfeeding. Her article was instigated by the negative judgments of breastfeeding mothers towards those who are not breastfeeding. These attitudes are unfortunate, as it is indeed difficult for many women to achieve optimal breastfeeding recommendations. USBC actively works to reduce or eliminate the barriers to breastfeeding, including social, economic, political, media/marketing, and health care factors. Rather than attempting to make a case “against” breastfeeding and allowing it to become another issue that divides women, we urge Ms. Rosin and *The Atlantic* to make the case *for* the support that so many American families lack. Ensuring that all women and families have the clear, balanced information about infant feeding choices to make informed decisions, and providing support through our health care system, workplace, and society, will ensure that all children can begin life in the healthiest way possible.

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The United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC) is an independent nonprofit coalition of 41 nationally influential professional, educational, and governmental organizations. Representing over half a million concerned professionals and the families they serve, USBC and its member organizations share a common mission to improve the Nation's health by working collaboratively to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding. For more information on USBC, visit www.usbreastfeeding.org.

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