



MIKE ROOKE

SOUR MILK

Virginia Larson

In February, we ran a story on breastfeeding. Its genesis was in conversations we had with mothers about their “failure” to breastfeed their babies, the guilt they experienced and the unhelpful, sometimes bullying, responses they had from maternity carers and online mothers’ groups.

Earlier, we’d received a phone call from a Wellington mother of five who said she was regularly and openly criticised by people for breastfeeding her children *beyond* an age these strangers deemed acceptable. Her message was simple: to respect people’s choices and support new mums. “What matters,” she said, “is you’re okay and the baby’s okay.”

If only it were that simple. In the introduction to Sarah Lang’s story, which shed light on some of the more militant “breast is best” discourse, we asked, “What’s happened to common sense and kindness?”. Unfortunately, nothing that’s unfolded since the story was published suggests either common sense or kindness has softened the hardliners’ views – online, especially.

I don’t believe for a moment people were kinder, gentler or more open-minded before social media allowed everyone a virtual soapbox and the opportunity to rant anonymously or otherwise. But I’m still surprised that some of the most vindictive, personally abusive online comments emanate from, let’s call them, the “caring crusaders” – from people who declare they want only

the best for children, for instance, or claim they love animals.

I mentioned this to a friend who works for a city council. She sent me a link to a website called Feline Rights NZ. Not only does this group describe Forest & Bird, Wellington City Council, the Morgan Foundation and the Polhill Restoration Project as “eco-extremist organisations”, it also posts photos of “enviro-nazis” and “cat ranger fascists” – mostly councillors, park rangers and the like, going about their law-abiding business.

Fringe-dwellers, you might say of Feline Rights, but there are members of groups like this whose fanaticism actually threatens individuals and their livelihoods. Department of Conservation (DoC) staff working on pest control know what lengths the “animal-loving” anti-1080 protesters will go to, having been abused and harassed by these activists. Some DoC workers have had wheel nuts loosened on their vehicles and poison left in their letterboxes.

Breastfeeding activists surely wouldn’t stoop to such tactics. After all, as Lang points out, “many women speak highly of midwives and Plunket” – and “you’d look long and hard to find a pregnant woman who *doesn’t* plan to breastfeed”. So it’s disappointing to report that a postnatal practitioner Lang interviewed for her article has been the subject of a sustained, seemingly orchestrated online attack. At one point, Philippa Murphy’s Facebook page was being hit almost daily, with damning accusations that she “puts the lives of babies and mothers at risk”, gives “damaging advice”, is “dangerous” and even a “plagiarist”.

Murphy’s Facebook page is an integral part of her service; it reflects her 23 years’ experience and hands-on care of infants, and carries feedback from parents she’s worked with. Her tormentors may not be sabotaging her car, but they are damaging her reputation. Their barrage of one-star ratings has seen her five-star rating from clients drop to a three. In contrast, Murphy’s responses to these accusatory posts have remained measured, professional and polite.

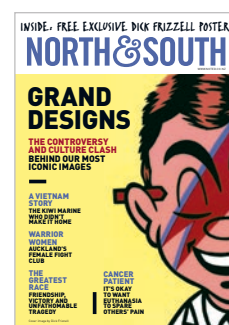
She’s no stranger to online bullying, however, and recently wrote to the Midwifery Council, in the hopes of ending a volley of highly critical comments from a local midwife. The council CEO said her complaint was unfounded, stating, “none [of the posts] appear to have any evidence of unfounded accusations”.

You’d have to wonder, then, what inflammatory statements Murphy has made that have attracted this level of vitriol. In Lang’s *North & South* story, you could sum up her comments as “breast is best... until a baby’s health or mother’s wellbeing are compromised; that’s when mixed-feeding or formula-feeding should be considered”. (For the full story, visit NOTED.co.nz and search for “breastfeeding”).

It’s also hard to believe midwives and breastfeeding advocates would object to the intervention policy proposals Murphy has delivered to the Minister of Health, advocating for more dedicated postnatal education and care for newborns and parents; she also wants soy-based formula removed from supermarket shelves, because of its phytoestrogen content.

Clearly, there are midwives, lactation consultants and baby nurses who don’t agree with Murphy’s approach to feeding problems and other parenting issues. She believes they have the right to their opinions. And she doesn’t post derogatory comments on their Facebook pages.

Murphy was reluctant to be the subject of this editorial; she told me she knows how hard midwives and nurses work and how stretched the service is. She didn’t want to be seen as “unkind”. It’s a pity the same benevolence hasn’t been extended to her. +



COVER CREDITS
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