MY YOUNGEST son David was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome in September 2013 and the care he has received from the NHS has been second to none. However, our journey has made it apparent to me that breastfeeding support on children’s wards and hospitals is lagging behind that found on neonatal units and in maternity hospitals.

I raised these issues with the hospital where David was born and I have been working with them as part of their drive to update their breastfeeding policies. I have a number of observations and suggestions about breastfeeding support in children’s settings.

Children’s hospitals do not have maternity wards so the need for first-class breastfeeding support is not always obvious, and the same is true of children’s wards in general hospitals. Yet if you have a sick baby who is transferred to a children’s ward at a few days or weeks old then breastfeeding could be an integral part of that baby’s care.

Perception
The common perception of breastfeeding in our society can be summed up by the odious phrase ‘breast is best’. The perception is that breastfeeding is an ideal. A lifestyle choice. A wonderful thing to do if everything is fantastic and straightforward in your life.

What effect does this perception have on the way that breastfeeding is viewed by some children’s nurses if you have a sick baby? Well, of course, it is the last thing you want to be worrying about isn’t it? You have enough stress in your life without putting yourself under pressure to breastfeed. Far better to remove one area of stress from your life and focus on other things. When your baby is very ill, getting the ‘best’ food is not a priority, as long as they are eating something, right?

Wrong. Breastfeeding is the biological norm, the way that humans have evolved to feed their children. Breast is not ‘best’, it is normal. Yes, there is a place for formula feeding – and thank goodness we have that option when it is necessary – but it is not the normal way that human babies are fed, and as such it does not offer anywhere near as much to the child as does breast milk. Why this matters for sick children becomes clear when you consider the following key information:

■ Breast milk guards against infection.
■ Feeding at the breast is a huge comfort to a child, the importance of which cannot be underestimated when the child is hospitalised.
■ Some hospitals class breast milk as a ‘clear fluid’, which means that it can be taken far closer to the time of an anaesthetic than formula can.
■ It is easy to digest and contains immune factors to protect a child’s gut.
■ Breastfeeding and breast milk provide pain relief.

Many of the potential solutions to this issue for children’s hospitals require investment, such as introducing lactation consultants to the staff. However, there are things that children’s nurses can do to support breastfeeding families:

■ Look outside of the NHS for information. I have found that staff have no knowledge of voluntary organisations and support pages that mums view as standard.
■ Remember that breastfeeding is more likely to be possible than impossible.
■ Follow the RCN’s guidelines for supporting breastfeeding on children’s wards – see resources.
■ Have a look at my website heartmummy.co.uk, for simple messages and guidance explaining how breastfeeding can be an important part of a child’s care.

Thankfully, due to the support of my best friend who is a breastfeeding peer supporter, I was able to express breast milk for the three and a half weeks that David was in hospital. At four weeks old, and once we were home, he latched on to me and has been breastfed ever since.

Helen Calvert is a campaigner for breastfeeding support @heartmummy

Resources

■ Kellymom (2011) Breastfeeding during Immunizations or Other Painful Procedures. tinyurl.com/kpqmr6s
■ Kellymom (2011) Breastfeeding to Sleep and Other Comfort. tinyurl.com/ltluxdc
■ Kellymom (2011) Immune Factors in Human Milk.tiny.cc/akfaqx
■ Royal College of Nursing (2005) Perioperative Fasting in Adults and Children. tinyurl.com/3ckhu9x
■ Royal College of Nursing (2013) Breastfeeding in Children’s Wards and Departments. Guidance for Good Practice. tinyurl.com/jwgespk