



Off to the best start

Niamh Kennelly discusses the PHN's role in breastfeeding support, including scope of practice and the available referral pathways

PREGNANCY, birth and the postnatal period is a time of significant personal, emotional, psychological and social change for women and their partners as they transition to becoming parents.¹

The first six to eight weeks after having a baby can be the most wonderful, exciting and happy times in the lives of parents, and this is how it is most often portrayed in the media. However, for many, the physical and psychological consequences of pregnancy and childbirth, coupled with the dawning reality of the momentous change in their social lives, as well as the change in the way in which they view themselves and their partner, can have a significant impact on their health and their relationships with each other and with their baby.^{1,2,3}

The Public Health Nurse (PHN) is most often the first health professional that an Irish mother and her partner will meet when she comes home from hospital with their baby. According to the HSE,⁴ the role of the PHN is to visit homes following birth notifications and to monitor child, maternal and family health, and to particularly focus on the benefits of breastfeeding.

The World Health Organization recommends that babies be exclusively breastfed for six months, with continued breastfeeding along with appropriate complementary foods for up to two years and beyond. (WHO).⁵ According to the HSE, 63.8% of Irish mothers initiate breastfeeding in our maternity units.⁶ This falls to 37.3% breastfeeding exclusively on the day of discharge from hospital and 26.1% non-exclusively breastfeeding.

Therefore, by the time the PHN sees many of these mothers – usually between day two and day seven, one-quarter will be combination feeding and many more may have completely stopped breastfeeding or be experiencing significant issues. The role of the PHN is to provide support, guidance and advice, as well as to refer families to the appropriate healthcare professionals, should more specialised care and advice be needed.

Role of the PHN

During the primary visit, one of the most important roles of the PHN in relation to breastfeeding support is active listening. Before any paperwork is taken out or physical checks are completed, it is so important to ask the woman about her experience and how she is feeling. You can tell a lot about how women are coping by just sitting, listening and watching body language, eye contact, physical movements and emotional state.

Asking open questions that invite her to tell her story and repeating back to her important observations that help her feel heard and understood will help her debrief and feel more relaxed. When mothers feel more relaxed, their babies tend to be more relaxed and feeding issues can be more easily resolved.

The PHN will then perform a top to toe assessment of the newborn, and a maternal health check. They will then observe a full breastfeed (with the mothers consent), and use the breastfeeding observation assessment tool (BOAT) to help recognise and address any breastfeeding issues.⁷ The

PHN will provide advice to parents with regard to care of the newborn, infant feeding, sleeping, core development etc.

Scope of the PHN within breastfeeding support

PHNs are generalists who refer clients to the relevant healthcare practitioners depending on the area of need. PHNs cannot be specialists in all of the areas that they cover, ie. wound care, child health, breastfeeding support, frail older adults, child welfare etc. Some PHNs develop interests in certain areas, such as wound care or breastfeeding, and may choose to educate themselves further in this area.

PHNs do a 20-hour breastfeeding education course as well as a maternal and child health nursing module as part of their training.⁸ They also have access to the HSEland modules on breastfeeding. This does not mean that PHNs are breastfeeding specialists and can solve every issue, but they do have a lot of knowledge that may or may not be enough to help a breastfeeding mother in crisis.

Therefore if PHNs encounter a parent who is having difficulties, and feel it is beyond their scope, they should ensure they know who to refer the parent to. The PHN should have knowledge of the following services in their area:

Area lactation PHN

A Primary, Community and Continuing Care (PCCC) form can be sent to the lactation PHN who covers your area. This PHN is a lactation consultant who has a high level of expertise with regards to all aspects of breastfeeding. Unfortunately,

for a mother in crisis, she may not get an in-person appointment when she urgently needs it as these PHNs usually work in a centralised location that covers a large geographical area. However, a telephone call or an online consultation may be sufficient in some cases. In some areas there may be more lactation PHNs available than others, but it's good to know your referral pathway, for when you or the mother you are working with needs support.

Hospital lactation consultant

Hospital-based lactation consultants are providing some fantastic services for women both antenatally and postnatally, from running free breastfeeding preparation workshops to providing postnatal outpatient style clinics for six weeks postnatally. As with all services however, they vary depending on where you live.

Voluntary organisations

Cuidiu Ireland and La Leche League have breastfeeding counsellors all over Ireland that provide free telephone support. See www.cuidiu.ie and www.lalecheleagueireland.com for further information. These are an excellent resource for new mothers, as well as a trusted support service for the PHN to refer families to. They also run weekly online Breastfeeding Support Groups, which were held in person before the pandemic, as well as conferences on breastfeeding, and have fantastic published material. *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* by La Leche League is still one of the core texts for breastfeeding mothers and professionals alike and one that I frequently read through.

Private lactation consultations

If parents wish to have a private lactation consultant, you can direct them to: www.alcireland.ie/find-a-consultant where there is a list of current lactation consultants who are available all over Ireland.

Personally, in order to create a more cohesive care plan and shared learning, I believe that there needs to be greater communication between the private lactation consultant, the PHN and the GP, but this ultimately comes down to parental consent for such communication. Some parents don't wish for their lactation consultant to discuss their consultation with their GP or PHN, which is their choice.

Local breastfeeding support groups

Pre-Covid-19, there were many local breastfeeding support groups around Ireland. I believe there should be a support group in every town in Ireland in order to recreate that lost generational knowledge

and support within communities. However, since Covid-19, many support groups have moved online including my own (Latching On Facebook Group).

The HSE also has weekly support groups that can be run by PHNs, hospital lactation consultants, or community lactation consultants, depending on where you live. Find out what is available in your area and give this information to the mothers you meet.

Details for the local baby-wearing library

Baby wearing is probably one of the most important (but less discussed) subjects to inform parents about, especially if they are breastfeeding and especially if they have other children. Firstly, babies who are worn cry less and are generally calmer. They also tend to suffer from less gastrointestinal issues as they are in an upright supported position. If you think about it, the baby is close to their parent at all times, can smell and feel them and can feel their warmth and heartbeat.

Babywearing is excellent for both parents to feel connected with their baby, and for their baby to feel connected with them. The added bonus is that both hands are free and mum or dad can tend to other tasks such as making a well deserved cuppa. Also, once baby gets used to the sling, they can also feed while in it, making feeding on the go possible.

Parents should be directed to: www.babywearingireland.ie, where they can find information on the Facebook group, rental libraries and get expert advice from baby wearing consultants who can help them choose the right sling for them and fit it properly and safely.

Online resources

Dr Google is a very dangerous place for new parents. The PHN should direct them towards online forums that have breastfeeding counsellors or lactation consultants as administrators as well as towards trusted online resources such as www.hse.ie, www.friendsofbreastfeeding.ie, www.breastfedbabies.org, www.alcireland.ie, www.kellymom.com, and www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk. The HSE My Child books are also an excellent source of information.¹⁰

Conclusion

I meet women every day who set out to breastfeed, but find themselves in a position where their plans do not come to fruition for many reasons. For some women and their babies, breastfeeding is relatively easy and with a few tips they will go on to have a wonderful journey, but for many mothers breastfeeding is hugely

challenging, overwhelming and ultimately all-consuming.

Covid 19 has also brought new challenges to the mix. In-person breastfeeding support groups have stopped. While some have moved online – and it is wonderful to have this option – there are many women who do not feel comfortable with this medium and it is certainly no substitute for in-person support.

PHNs provide an invaluable service to the families of Ireland. The level of knowledge and expertise required to care for the postnatal mother, her baby and partner is extremely high. PHNs are incredibly passionate about providing the very best of care to our clients, but they cannot be all things to all people. This is why it is so important that PHNs are aware of the services that are available to them and the families they serve, in order to enable and empower each mother who chooses to breastfeed to be able to do so.

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