

Why breastfeeding is under threat in Australia

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A researcher from the Australian National University (ANU) warns breastfeeding is declining in Australia.

Dr. Julie Smith, who has studied the economics of [breastfeeding](#) for over 20 years, says the invisible work of caring for a baby means Australian

mothers don't get the [maternity leave](#) they need.

"Australian women produce more than 40 million litres of [milk](#) for our infants and young children each year, though this value is not counted in our national food statistics, or noticed in the national budget," said Dr. Smith, from the Research School of Population Health.

"Because we don't measure it, we don't appreciate its value, and governments fail to invest in programs and services that support it."

Dr. Smith says breastfeeding is worth at least \$3.6 billion to the economy, using market values.

"Most industrialised countries have sufficient paid maternity leave so mothers can exclusively breastfed for six months, in line with the World Health Organization (WHO)," said Dr. Smith.

"Women's time is not free. If we don't document the cost of feeding and caring for [babies](#) and [young children](#), it is taken for granted by policymakers.

"Having a baby or toddler is amazingly time intensive, yet official statistics ignore this investment."

Previous ANU research showed that introducing just a few weeks of paid maternity leave in 2011 increased breastfeeding and improved mothers' mental [health](#) months down the track.

Dr. Smith says we should count breastmilk as part of the national food supply.

"Norway counts breastmilk as part of its national food statistics and we should too.

"My research shows it takes mothers about 40-hours each week to care for a new baby, including around 18 hours to breastfeed, yet this is not considered relevant to health or work policies by government statisticians.

"Failure to help mothers with breastfeeding cost the nation almost \$4 billion in lost baby milk production, and hundreds of millions of dollars in preventable health costs."

New milk markets

Dr. Smith warns that mother-to-baby feeding will be displaced if breastfeeding support is not prioritised by health services and governments.

The researcher is warning of the urgent need for tough regulation with the newly emerging markets in human milk.

"Expanding Australia's human milk banking system will save lives and save on health costs. With pasteurised donor milk for NICU now selling at around \$300 a litre internationally, companies are keen to generate new markets," said Dr. Smith.

"It is only a matter of time before Australian parents will see UHT human milk promoted alongside formula in the shopping aisles."

Provided by Australian National University

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