

In the last issue, I highlighted the situation whereby some midwives and mothers perceive that the WHO Child Growth Standards (2006) do not accurately represent the reality of the way in which breastfed babies grow. They have noticed that, when the weights of some of the babies who they perceive to be breastfeeding well are mapped onto the charts over the course of two or three visits, they can seem to be falling behind the average. This is of particular concern because, unlike their predecessors, the charts are based on the measurement of thousands of breastfed and well babies, and this situation thus raises a number of questions.

### Evaluating the Methods

The idea that the WHO charts would be 'kinder' to breastfeeding mothers and breastfed babies is entirely understandable when considered in the light of the facts that previous charts included the measurements of babies who were bottle fed and that feeding different milks by different methods may lead to differences in growth rates. Statistics, however, are neither kind nor unkind; they are merely numbers which represent the data that humans set out to collect and analyse. One of the most important questions, then, concerns the need to look closely at the way in which the statistics were gathered. It is always possible that there will exist some means by which bias entered a research study and that this explains the lack of correlation between the charts and the reality.

The methods section of the WHO document, however, is hard to fault, and this is unsurprising given the level of thought and expertise that has gone into the development of these standards. Superb in its detail (if often so technical that one needs a high-level understanding of statistics to make sense of it), the study has clearly been well thought through and carried out. The measuring tools, checking methods and recording standards used in the studies on which the charts are based were impeccable. This means that we then need to consider the other side of the coin. If the study itself was so well conducted that we can find no problem in the way that the standards were compiled, could the fact that there is a discrepancy between the standards and what we perceive ourselves to know about the growth of breast-fed babies mean that our existing knowledge is inaccurate?

### Time to Re-think Dogma?

In a recent article, Davies (2008) pointed out that some of the key "facts" relating to breastfeeding are

in fact theoretical assumptions and that "we are still essentially naïve about the complexities of lactation" (43). This caused me to wonder whether the notion that babies lose weight after birth is another theoretical assumption which could be challenged. Perhaps this is true only for a very few babies? Or perhaps a fair number of babies put on a lot of weight in the first few days after birth and thus 'cancel out' the data gathered from those babies who lose weight? Neither of these possibilities corresponded to my own experiences, but it is entirely possible that my experiences are unusual and so, in the interests of research, I decided to ask around.

Some of the texts on evidence-based practice emphasise the importance of reporting on research even when the results do not show anything interesting, and it is with this in mind that I am proud to tell you that my asking around didn't lead to my being able to offer a new theory of weight gain in the first few days. The midwives I asked were all interested by the question and prepared to reflect upon it. A few even said that it might be interesting to pay more attention to the proportion of babies who lost or gained weight in the first few days. Like me, however, the other midwives I talked to have all had experiences which have led them to believe that weight loss is totally usual and something that they would expect to see from their experience. They underpinned this with reference to knowledge about the physiological adaptations that a baby makes after birth and even the deepest and most open-minded reflection didn't cause them to feel that maybe they should stop expecting to see weight loss in a good proportion of breast fed babies.

In any case, the WHO standards embrace the idea that it is normal for breast fed babies to lose weight during the first few days, and this is reflected in both the documentation and the charts themselves. This is, as I noted in the first part of this article, one of the most laudable aspects of this whole project, yet for all my looking at the methods and reflecting on practice and existing knowledge, I hadn't answered the question which had set me off looking at all of this. I could see only one more possible avenue for exploration, and it is this that I will talk about next month in my final article on this topic.

Davies, L (2008) Breastfeeding method and infant weight gain. *Practising Midwife*, 11(7): 41-43

WHO (2006) WHO Child Growth Standards based on length/height, weight and age. *Acta Paediatrica Supplement 450*: 76-85. Also available online at: <http://www.who.int/childgrowth/en/>