

I was in the hospital for a week after I had my daughter Sofia. Each day, several times a day, I would wander down the hall to make myself a cup of tea in the common room. I would dunk my green-tea bag in a soulless mug and stare at this one poster on the wall. It was a very large poster. It was impossible not to see it when you entered the room. The poster listed “101 reasons to breastfeed” in a forceful black-and-white design.

This poster told me things I already believed. Various organisations, such as UNICEF and the World Health Organisation, recommend breast over bottle for babies. Breastfeeding is a cheap and easy way to feed your child. Breast milk is the best form of infant nutrition. Breastfeeding helps mothers lose the excess weight gained during pregnancy.

The poster also told me some new things. Breastfeeding satisfies babies’ emotional needs, promoting bonding between mother and child. Formula feeding increases a baby’s chance of developing a terrifying menu of diseases, as well as exposing them to a greater risk of dying of SIDS or becoming obese, whereas breastfeeding helps to protect a child against developing asthma, allergies and vision defects. Apparently, formula feeding is associated with lower IQ as well.

Suffice to say, I reread the poster every day of my hospital stint. It was meant to be encouraging, but to this new mother it was a daily reminder that I was failing in my job after only a week of employment. My mind flashed forward to images of me and Sofia, both unbound and bloated; her with low IQ and bad eyesight, me with developing breast tumours.

I am overdramatising, of course, as new mothers sometimes do. However, the thing that irked me about that poster was that I didn’t need convincing that breastfeeding was the way to go. I’d joined the association, read the books, scrubbed my nipples weekly with a toothbrush. But try as I could, with all the goodwill in the world, I had a terrible time with breastfeeding. Even now, I can hardly recall the pain of childbirth but can vividly remember the

pain inflicted by my daughter’s pitiless little mouth.

Now no one likes to read about breasts over Sunday brunch (unless they belong to Jessica Alba). But less than an hour after my daughter’s birth, I tried to breastfeed, only to have her suck my nipples so hard they were badly damaged. We weren’t mastering the “latching on” process I had read so much about. As we waited for my nipples to heal so we could try again, I kept my milk up and fed my baby as much as the midwife’s pinching fingers and the breast pump could provide. I slathered myself in balms and applied cold packs. I pumped so much I overstimulated one breast and got mastitis. As painful and frustrating as it was, I wanted to keep going, not least because the midwives kept telling me: “Just when you think you want to give up, that’s when it will start to work!”

The nipples got better and we tried again, without much success. A shield was brought in, which looked not unlike the fake nipples Samantha uses as a man-lure in *Sex And The City*. It provided temporary relief. Then just as I thought we had found the solution, the pain returned, even with the shield. I peeled back the plastic one afternoon to see what looked like blood blisters forming.

The breaking point for me was one night when Sofia was crying and needed a feed. My husband brought her over to me, but as he went to place her in my arms my whole torso convulsed away from her. “Just get her away!” I thought to myself. I realised at that moment that breastfeeding, something I thought would bring us closer together, was driving us apart. So I relented, we gave her some formula and she drifted off to sleep in my arms.

I can’t pretend that I didn’t feel guilty about the choice I made. It took me some time to get over it. Some would describe it as a selfish decision. I put my desire to be free of pain ahead of breastfeeding – something that “good” and

“selfless” mothers are not supposed to do. What helped, though, was reviewing the research on breastfeeding and discovering that the benefits it is supposed to bestow on the baby – better skin, higher IQ, preventing obesity – are not as clear-cut as we’ve been led to believe. Continuing to breastfeed because of such studies seemed a tenuous reason when the process was making both of us miserable.

Even now, I feel guilty when I consider the few nice things about not having to breastfeed (“Your turn to do the 2am, darling”). In the months after Sofia’s birth, I would only admit such things in hushed tones to other, sympathetic mothers.

But I can say now that I have made peace with the decision, because I know it is one of a thousand I will make as a mother, and by no means the most important one. The past year of my daughter’s life has been challenging and at times tiring, but the issues my husband and I have faced have also been relatively simple. As children get older, the job of parenting gets harder.

If I am lucky enough to have another child, I will give breastfeeding a red-hot go until, well, I can’t stand my breasts being red and hot any more. And, more importantly, if I feel it works for me as well as my baby. Put that on a poster. ●

Mother's milk

Breastfeeding is meant to be life-giving, but Rebecca Huntley says the pressure to get it right can suck the life out of mothers.



Rebecca Huntley, with daughter Sofia, is a director at market research firm Ipsos Mackay.