

From the Kitchen

2 June 2010



Breastfeeding welcomed here. A simple, small sticker on the door of a café, letting mothers know that they are not going to be harassed if they show a bit of flesh. Across the road, at another café, four young women are sitting around a table in intimate discussion. They are leaning forward, their breasts almost falling out of their tops. And, by the way, breastfeeding is *not* welcome in *this* café.

This is all very confusing for a clear-thinker. Why is it even necessary for a café to announce that mothers may feed their infants here, naturally? They should naturally be able to feed them anywhere.

As a society, we tolerate the public display of naked and almost naked breasts on television and on magazine covers, at gala events and in newspapers. What is it about breastfeeding that has people protest? Could it be that a breastfeeding mother is presumably in a committed relationship and, therefore, her breasts are not available to the men who might get a glimpse of them? Could it be that we have been convinced that bottle-feeding is better, cleaner and more convenient and that, therefore, breastfeeding is weird? Are we in the thrall of businesses that make a buck out of replacing breast milk with a formula?

We could be excused for coming to such a conclusion, as we see business pitted against common sense in medicine, power generation, farming and food production, and many other aspects of our lives. We seem to be circumscribed by what is best for businesses. If money can be made by controlling an activity or an aspect of life, then it more easily receives support from legislators and regulators.

In Australia, many medicines are made available at heavily discounted prices through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), a part of Medicare Australia. This costs the taxpayer billions of dollars each year. Most medicines available through the PBS are patented drugs. Doctors *can* allow 'generic' drugs to be dispensed – drugs on which patents have lapsed – but relatively few do. Very few preparations of 'natural' substances receive PBS subsidy, even though doing so could save taxpayers millions of dollars. However, they would make less money for the pharmaceutical industry. On the other hand, they are often more effective and they would kill fewer people – people who die from known and statistically expected side effects when taking prescribed pharmaceutical medicines as directed.

There are so many ways that we harm ourselves by believing that we can do better than the nature of which we are a part; and, like many people with gambling problems, we convince ourselves that a solution or breakthrough (the jackpot) is just around the corner, if we could try that little bit harder and persevere just a little longer. We have been doing this for over forty years in the 'war' against cancer and we are no closer to a 'victory', yet ever more people are employed in this endeavour. Cancer has become an industry within the general disease industry and it is worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

We display the same infantile faith in our future ability to sequester CO₂ in the ground or to develop 'clean coal', in order that we can continue doing what we know to be wrong. It reminds me of me as a child, trusting that my misdemeanours wouldn't be discovered, yet at some level hoping that they would, because that would have been a relief. Oh for that relief.

By law, corporations have an obligation to maximise the return to shareholders, but this needs to be (and is) tempered with regulation of behaviour. Unfortunately, the regulating bodies seem to be progressively losing their teeth or less willing to bite, or both. This is partly due to the increasing tendency to appoint to these regulating bodies 'experts' who were once (often very recently) employed by the companies which are subject to the regulation. When all this is married with ex-politicians (including ex-ministers) and ex-public servants moving into 'advisory' positions in industry, we have a situation where regulation and ethical behaviour can easily disappear.

I know, from personal experience, that separating knowledge gained in one job from the needs of a new job can be extremely difficult, which is why it is common to prohibit senior ex-employees from moving to a competitor in less than a certain number of years. It should also be illegal for someone who has held a senior position in government to move into an advisory role in business before some years have elapsed. It is impossible to forget things one has been privy to and only a period of 'cooling down' will make enough of that privileged knowledge irrelevant.

As for breastfeeding ... I recently overheard two suited men complaining about a crying baby in a café, before they both commenced separate, loud conversations on their mobile phones. The baby was soon quieted by the offer of a breast, but seemed a little disturbed by the loud, almost argumentative voices of the two businessmen. They, in turn, complained to a waitress that the breastfeeding mother was distracting them from their meeting.