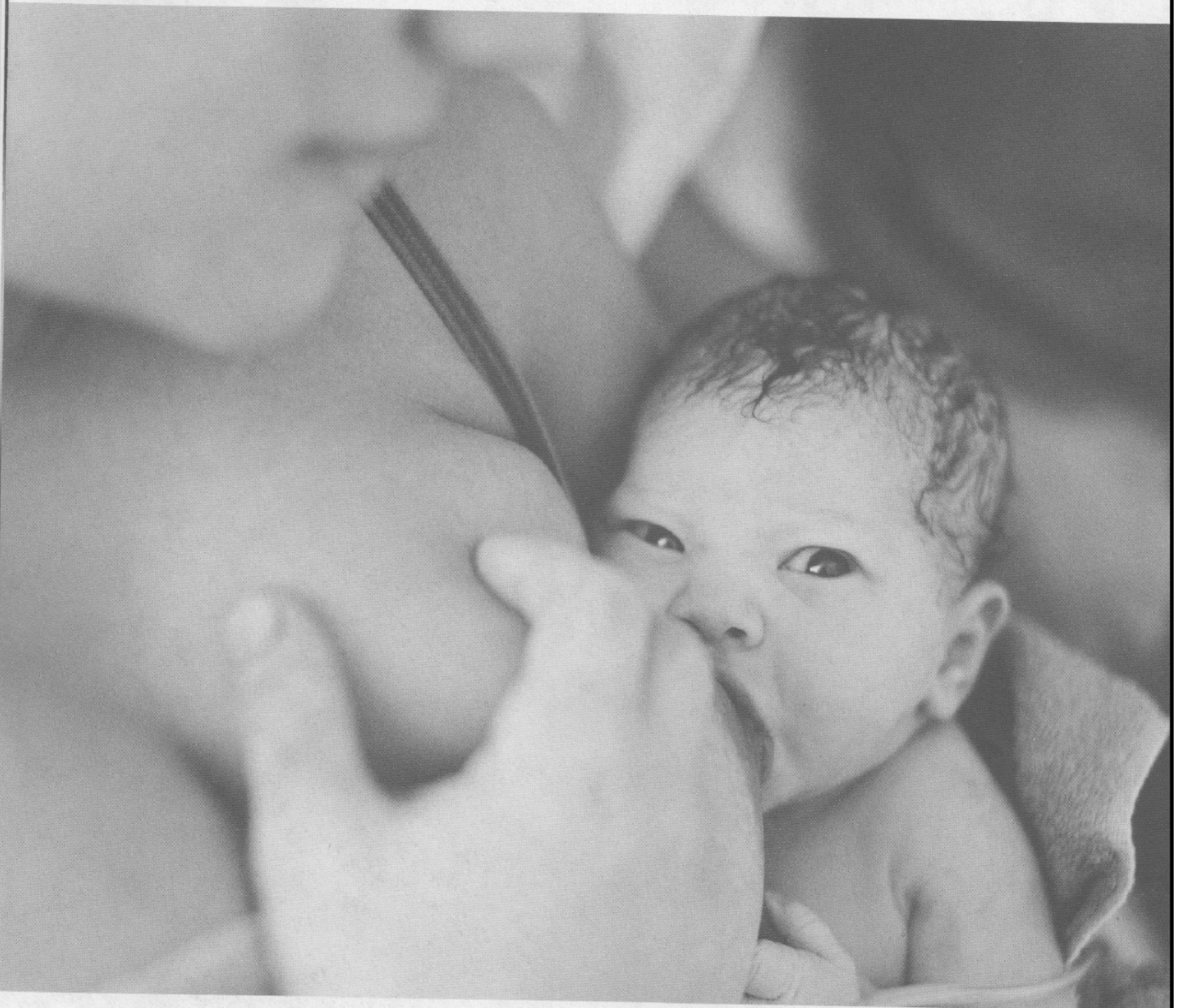


# Breastfeeding Support at Yayasan Bumi Sehat: A Student Midwife's Reflections

by Lindsey Jean Stirling



**As a fourth-year midwifery student,** I had the opportunity to go to Yayasan Bumi Sehat in Nyuh Kuning, Bali. To learn from Ibu Robin Lim and to gain experience in the art of midwifery was a dream come true. For many a budding birthkeeper, attending births, receiving babies and caring for women during childbirth are the most appealing areas

of midwifery practice; indeed, inside the birth room, one masters essential midwifery skills. Until only a few days ago, I believed that the birth process marked the birth of the mother. Although birth is a profound rite of passage through the doorway of motherhood, I came to learn that sometimes the true birth of the mother is hallmarked by the mas-

tery of breastfeeding. This insight was gifted to me only a few days ago when I was asked by Ibu Robin to visit one of our new mothers at her home. This is my story.

“Is it normal that my baby is shrinking?” asked the 38-year-old, single Indonesian mother. Alarmed by her question, I explained to her that “shrinking”

was not normal or desirable for a baby. I began to probe further into her circumstances. I looked around her home and saw a baby bottle with some milk inside, a breast pump, a sleeping one-week-old baby and a mother who appeared stoic and exhausted. As she explained to me that she was pumping her milk every few hours to feed her baby, I asked her why she wasn't simply breastfeeding. She told me her baby did not like her breast and preferred the bottle. She explained that her baby had "terms and conditions" and that she would only suckle her breast after she got the bottle. As I questioned a little more, I found that the baby was very jaundiced, dehydrated and appeared somewhat lethargic. Alarm bells started to go off in my head, and I knew that this baby and mama needed help.

After a discussion and consultation with Ibu Robin, we decided it was best for both mama and baby to stay at the clinic in order to test baby's bilirubin; if we found it to be above normal, we would then initiate blue light therapy (12 hours on, 12 hours off the bili blanket—no separation from mother) to treat the jaundice and to provide around-the-clock breastfeeding support. After some negotiating with the mama, she agreed to come to the clinic so we could treat her baby and support her efforts to establish breastfeeding.

Ibu Robin asked me to "take this challenge" and commit to supporting this mother to fully breastfeed her baby. I reluctantly agreed, knowing from some past experience how difficult provision of breastfeeding support can be. I made the commitment to spend the night with the motherbaby, sleeping next to them in order to provide the encouragement and support needed to get the baby to accept the breast.

During the first feed at the clinic, the baby screamed and screamed and would not take to the breast. After a while, I felt my resolve starting to melt; maybe we should just give her a bottle, I shamefully thought to myself. There were times when I felt anger toward the mama for not listening to the advice I was trying to give her, such as "Be sensitive to baby's early hunger cues" and "Don't try to feed a screaming baby; console her first, then

put her to the breast" or "First get yourself comfortable, then bring baby to your breast." After what felt like a long while of persisting with no positive results, I decided to take myself out of the equation. It became apparent that the tension both the mama and I were experiencing was being transferred to the baby, making it more difficult to calm her down.

Feeling somewhat like a failure (being sleep deprived after a long night of births wasn't helping), I walked over to Ibu Robin's home to express my frustrations. I hoped some fresh energy and a new perspective would help the situation. It worked! A cup of tea, some food and reassurance that I was human and doing quite well really, all helped settle my heart down. After easily changing the feeding position to football style, which earlier the mother had refused to try, the baby accepted the breast and suckled for 40 minutes. We all felt a great sense of relief!

I was struck by the gentle, faithful and positive approach that Ibu Robin communicated toward motherbaby and me. She truly believed in the mother and she truly believed in the baby's ability to latch on to the breast, but I also felt she believed in my ability to provide support. She explained that this was a "smart baby" who has trouble transitioning from a bottle nipple to a mother nipple because the bottle is easier. A smart baby knows that drinking from a bottle requires less effort and, therefore, attempts to negotiate her terms and conditions. This perspective resonated deeply with the mama, and she had the profound realization that she too has terms and conditions and that together she and her baby could work it out.

This positive experience allowed this mother to find her own self-belief and resolve to breastfeed her baby. In so doing, she began transforming into the mother she is called to be, and her baby felt it. Throughout the night, there were still moments of difficulty and challenges to overcome, but with each breastfeed it became easier. After each little challenge was overcome, the mama and I shared some reflections on what we had learned from the experience. The mother was now recognizing her baby's early

hunger cues and offering her baby the breast before she began to cry. One of the things that the mama shared with me was how she felt that her baby could read her mind, and it wasn't until she had made the clear choice to only give her baby the breast that things started to shift in a positive way.

During this process, I witnessed my own learning, softening and acceptance of feeling powerless to control a situation and instead learned how to work with that feeling, realizing that in any moment things can change for the better. When alternatives, such as bottle-feeding, are not an option anymore and a clear decision to breastfeed has been made, a way forward is provided. It simply has to work, it is designed to work and it will work despite the challenges and frustrations a mother may face, but support is vital.

At 5 am the following morning, it was time for me to pass the baton. I felt good to do so, as I was tired and had given this motherbaby all I had to offer. Allowing another midwife to take my place felt satisfying and reassuring, also reinforcing to me that I, too, have and need support. When midwives work together in the best interest of the motherbaby, and of each other, everybody benefits.

Over the next two days, I visited the mama and her baby at the clinic. On the second day, she appeared transformed—she had become a mother. She expressed her joy to me; she stood proud and strong. Her beauty shone through her eyes as she beamed with life, solid in the foundation of motherhood.



Lindsey Jean Stirling is completing her final year of a nursing and midwifery degree in Melbourne, Australia. Following the birth of her daughter in 1996, she became deeply committed to embodying a more holistic approach to life. Lindsey went on to study nutrition, nourishment and healing in India, Australia and Colorado. After working as a professional nutritionist for several years in Boulder, Colorado, she felt called to become a midwife. Lindsey is deeply grateful to all the midwives at Bumi Sehat Birthing Clinic in Ubud, Bali, who opened their hearts to share their birthkeeper wisdom and knowledge with her, and to the motherbabies who inspired the birth of this article.