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Giving Breastmilk: Body Ethics and Contemporary Breastfeeding Practice

Rhonda Shaw and Alison Bartlett, editors

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This collection draws on a number of academic disciplines to explore contemporary practice on the giving of human milk, a bodily fluid, and conflicted ideas on breastmilk itself, the gift relationship and ethical issues. The usual focus today on the giving and receiving of breastmilk is on safety, with often a greater emphasis than is accorded to safety in the use of substitutes. Thus breastmilk, despite being acknowledged as 'best,' is also perceived by the health sector, the law and the public as a potential source of infection or drugs. While the book addresses safety issues, the authors explore much more.

Breastmilk is given or received via direct breastfeeding or by expression. The first chapter, on the breast pump, presents a cost-benefit exploration where the benefits are enabling the mother to maintain lactation, to provide milk for her child and to avoid giving substitutes. Nevertheless, the mothers surveyed regarded pumping as 'second best.' The costs were the frustrations of pumping, the cost of efficient pumps, and findings that few achieved exclusive breastmilk feeding. Some regarded the focus that pumping places on the volume of milk as positive and others as negative.

As breastfeeding is an embodied aspect of women's lives, mothers attempt to resolve the dichotomous concepts of the sexual and the motherly, of the idealized female body and the lactating body. The authors discuss the implications for women of the public health message that breastfeeding and giving breastmilk is virtuous, which is contested by some writers, and the various concepts and practical limitations that impact on providing breastmilk. They explore the complex cultural contexts surrounding gift-giving, including milk siblingship. Also discussed are viewpoints on whether milk provided to a milk bank should be offered as a gift or remunerated.

The final section, 'Milk Theory,' views breastmilk through the prism of specific philosophical, psychoanalytical and social theories. An index would have been an asset. This book provides food for reflection to those who are working with mothers who are giving or receiving breastmilk.

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