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Clinicians tackle common tongue problem in babies

An undiagnosed tongue problem in babies can cause distress for mothers and babies, but a simple, straight-forward procedure fixes the problem, according to researchers at the University of Melbourne and the Royal Women's Hospital.

Tongue-tie is a congenital anomaly where the thin piece of skin under the tongue, known as the frenulum, is abnormally short, restricting tongue mobility and potentially causing breastfeeding problems.

Tongue-tie can be mild or severe and may interfere with a baby's ability to suckle properly at the breast leading to nipple pain and trauma, poor breastmilk intake and a drop in milk supply. The condition is found in about 3% of newborns, with baby boys more commonly affected. But it is often undiagnosed and there is disagreement among doctors about whether or not the frenulum should be released.

Dr Lisa Amir at the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne, and Jennifer James and Joanne Beatty of the Breastfeeding Education and Support Service, Royal Women's Hospital, assessed 66 babies with tongue-tie, aged under three months. After obtaining parental consent, the researchers examined the appearance and function of the baby's tongue and the frenulum was released when necessary.

The study, published in the *Journal of Paediatric and Child Health*, found that babies did not appear to be distressed by the procedure and there was minimal blood loss. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction and 83% said breastfeeding improved after the procedure.

"Frenotomy has been performed without anaesthetic and we wanted to know if parents were comfortable with the procedure," said Dr Amir. The decision to release a tongue-tie often depends on a clinician's belief about the possible impact on feeding. Currently, clinicians are divided in opinion, which can lead to confusion for parents.

Because of the differences of opinion, the hospital has produced a brochure for parents about tongue-tie in infants and a video will be available later in 2005.

The factsheet is at:

http://www.rwh.org.au/womensinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc_id=5715

Amir, L H. James, JP and Beatty, J. "Review of tongue-tie release at a tertiary maternity hospital" *J Paediatr Child Health* 2005; 41; 243-245. (an editorial and second research paper on tongue tie can be found in the same edition of the journal)

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