



**Gillian Weaver**

Chair UKAMB  
Manager Queen  
Charlotte's and Chelsea  
Hospital Milk Bank,  
London

## UKAMB: Celebrating ten years of 'Making Every Drop Count'

The 20th and 21st of September in Chester later this year will be memorable days for the United Kingdom Association for Milk Banking (UKAMB) as it celebrates its tenth anniversary by holding an international human milk banking conference. The conference is aimed at all those involved in safely recruiting and screening donors, testing and processing the donated breastmilk and prescribing and using donor milk to feed premature and sick babies on the neonatal unit and beyond. Milk banking personnel will be joined by lactation specialists, microbiologists, neonatal nurses, midwives and neonatologists as well as by technical staff and breastfeeding supporters (see page 164 for details).

Ten years ago, prior to the formation of UKAMB, there were thirteen milk banks in the UK. Twelve were in England including seven in the South East with three of those located in London. There were no milk banks in Northern Ireland or Wales, Scotland had a single bank in Glasgow and very large areas of England were without any at all. Importantly, with one exception, the banks that were operating were funded and resourced to provide donor breastmilk to their local neonatal unit only and this meant there were very limited opportunities for other hospitals to obtain supplies. Milk banks were run by staff with no easy access to appropriate training and education opportunities or to a forum for the exchange of information, experience and expertise. All this meant that despite an increased interest in the use of donor milk, particularly for the feeding of premature infants, there was little opportunity to gain access to regular or assured supplies.

The publication of evidence-based guidelines<sup>1</sup>, in 1994 provided a much needed basis for responding to the growing demand. Disappointingly however, the widely held belief was that all milk banks had closed and it was no longer possible for breastfeeding mothers to help sick and premature babies by donating their surplus milk. Equally worrying was the unfounded belief that as a result of the emergence of HIV infection in the 1980s, it was no longer safe to use donor milk and so there was a marked reluctance to consider starting a bank.

Despite all this, things were about to change. Following a successful conference held in 1997 at Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea Hospital in London, a call for the establishment of a national association to support and underpin safe and accountable milk banking led to the formation of

the organisation now commonly known as UKAMB. Dr Sue Balmer was appointed as the first chairperson, and with the help of a management board comprising milk banking staff from half of the banks, spent the following year establishing UKAMB as a registered charity and setting out the organisation's aims. Annual conferences and meetings have followed together with the provision of milk banking road shows and study and support sessions. Newsletters have been published together with leaflets and posters that can be used by any of the milk banks. UKAMB has provided a national resource by mapping milk banking activity and forging valuable links with milk banks and milk banking associations around the globe. New and emerging milk banks in countries as far away as Australia and New Zealand have benefited from the wealth of experience that UKAMB is able to share.

During the intervening years, four new banks have been established. These include a major regionally funded milk banking service operating in Northern Ireland, two new banks in the North West one of which serves as a regular source of donor milk to hospitals in North Wales, and a new bank in Central London at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital. Of equal importance has been the increased activity by most of the UK banks leading to a year on year total increase in volumes of donor milk collected nationally with almost 5000 litres processed in 2005. UKAMB audits this and other information from all the milk banks and so serves as the only source of valuable data with which to inform debate about the current situation and about the future.

The long term future of milk banking in the UK remains unclear as UKAMB continues to call for a national and appropriately regulated service and most neonatal units continue to be denied equitable access to this valuable resource. Up to date research-based evidence from randomised controlled trials reflecting current usage of donor milk in the UK remains elusive. However studies are planned to investigate further the role of donor milk in preventing necrotising enterocolitis and late onset sepsis, reducing time to full enteral feeds and supporting and promoting breastfeeding on neonatal units. It is likely that the next ten years will be as important for the future of milk banks in the UK as the last ten. The UKAMB will recognise both the successes of the past and the challenges of the future in Chester in September.

### References

1. **Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of a Human Milk Bank in the UK.** 2003 edition available from UKAMB – [www.ukamb.org](http://www.ukamb.org).