

EARNING TRIAL-BY-FIRE STRIPES



RUKHMINI PUNOOSE

From writing for Newsweek in New York to DNA in Mumbai, writer and editor Rukhmini Punoose's current full-time employers are her 4-year-old son and infant daughter.

THE MOMMY CIRCUS

Yesterday, my three-month-old daughter had a minor surgery. By the time you read this, I will know how it went. As I watched her lying on the bed playing before the surgery, blissfully unaware of what was to happen to her in a few hours, I found myself silently talking to her. I willed her to be calm and strong through the procedure, apologised for the pain her father and I were going to make her experience, explained why this would help her and lastly reassured her (and myself) that it would all be okay.

As the mother of two children, I have learned that nothing makes you discover your mettle like parenting. It strips you down to your soul and shows you what you're really made of. You can spend much of your adult life hiding behind all these tags you've given yourself— Patient, Creative, Calm, Unflappable...have children and poof, they will twist your insides like Play-Doh, break your mind down when they are dangerously ill and drive you up the wall when you're trying to get things done. Yet, nothing can light you up faster, make you laugh at the hilarious things they say and do or give more sustained joy (and guilt).

I have always prided myself on being non-squeamish about blood and gore, the unflappable 'Brave One' in the family. I've sat through family members going through cornea transplants, countless stitches, biopsies, cradled a hit-and-run victim's head with half his head blown off on my blood-drenched lap as we rushed him to an emergency room. And honestly, I haven't flinched. Yet, as a brand-new mother when a nurse was cutting the nails of my first-born and she lopped off too much skin causing his delicate two-day-old finger to bleed, before I knew it, silent tears were coursing down my cheeks.

So you can imagine, how I felt about surgeons putting a laser into my teeny daughter's mouth to cut her frenulum (the thin strip of tissue that connects the underside of the tongue to the base of the mouth) to loosen it. The process of removing it, called a frenectomy, is reasonably common across the world. A tight frenulum is genetic and runs in families and can cause speech defects, snoring, buck teeth, gag reflex and breast feeding difficulties. My daughter had difficulty nursing from the time she was born and while she would make valiant attempts to latch on, she was unable to open her mouth wide enough or move her tongue freely and would frequently give up and

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shut down in frustration.

It took a very dedicated lactation consultant in Goregaon from the La Leche League, (<http://www.llli.org/india.html>) an international NGO with chapters in many Indian cities, that helps new mothers overcome feeding difficulties, to diagnose my daughter, explaining that she had difficulty feeding because her tongue was restricted and her mouth couldn't open wide. Even though nearly 10% of children have such issues, Indian paediatricians, even the best ones, do not check for this condition and it goes undiagnosed. In the past four decades, bottle feeding and formula have

become very common, resulting in two generations of mothers not even knowing if their infants have tongue tie. Now, with the resurgence of breastfeeding and the widespread knowledge of its benefits, countless mothers are forced to give up nursing due to improper diagnosis and difficulty, which is tragic. Earlier, when births were largely conducted by midwives and *daimaas*, they would check a newborn's mouth and if the frenulum was too tight, they would just slice it with their nail and loosen it. This knowledge has been lost with the onslaught of bottle feeding.

I needn't have worried about the frenectomy. Despite the fact that this was only the second time they had performed it on an infant, Dr Suchetan Pradhan and Dr Shalini Pradhan, were highly competent. She even designed an instrument to hold the baby's tongue up during the procedure. And my daughter is loving her new-found tongue mobility. She has been smiling non-stop and constantly sticking her tiny tongue out. It has only been 24 hours and yet she already seems more relaxed during her feeds. While it was difficult to watch and hold her down during the surgery, seeing how happy she is now, makes it all worth it.

Yet another trial-by-fire stripe I've earned on my parenting uniform.

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ply, such products offer the food industry a proven and practical means of tackling the fungal contamination at its source.

An excellent example is corn that is crafted by splicing into commercial varieties a gene (or genes) from a harmless bacterium. The bacterial genes express proteins that are toxic to corn-boring insects, but that are harmless to birds, fish, and mammals, including humans. As the modified corn fends off insect pests, it also reduces the levels of the mold *Fusarium*, thereby reducing the levels of fumonisin.

Researchers at Iowa State University and the US Department of Agriculture have found that the level of fumonisin in the modified corn is reduced by as much as 80% compared to conventional corn.

Given the health benefits governments should introduce incentives to increase use of genetically engineered crops. Alas this has not come to pass. Activists continue to mount vocal and tenacious opposition to genetically engineered foods, despite almost 20 years of demonstrated benefits, including reduced use of chemical pesticides, greater use of farming practices that prevent soil erosion, higher profits for farmers, and less fungal contamination.

Responding to the bleating of activists, policymakers have subjected the testing and commercialisation of genetically engineered crops to unscientific and draconian regulations, with dire consequences. Public policy that discriminates against and discourages vital innovations in food production is not policy that has the public's interest at heart.

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