

**I**t's a term most associated with the 18th century – the bustling wet nurse employed by the wealthy noblewoman to feed her babies, leaving her free to regain her duties and social standing. But time passed and our civilisations developed and wet nurses – at least in the West – were soon made obsolete thanks to a combination of social change and the emergence of bottle-feeding; the practice relegated to the dusty annals of history. Or so we thought.

Fast-forward to Hollywood 2007, where celebrities are adopting children from around the globe, women opt for early caesareans to save their figures and the wealthy employ teams of staff to run their lives. From butlers and chauffeurs, nannies and gourmet chefs, dog walkers and spiritual assistants – the Jolie-Pitts have even reportedly hired a “philanthropic advisor” to tell them which developing country to fly to next – the fact is, if you've got the cash, you can get the staff. And as “breast is best”, it makes perfect sense that the latest accessory *du jour* for the A-list mother is a woman to breastfeed her baby. Yes, the big-breasted wet nurse is back. Although, this time, she's not in bloomers. ▶

## Wet nurses: the latest

# A-list accessory!

First they were too posh to push, now celebrities are too busy to breastfeed. Leo Bear reports on the latest Hollywood must-have – the wet nurse

**R**obert Feinstock runs Certified Household Staffing (CHS), a Beverly Hills agency that provides wealthy clients with staff such as bodyguards, valets, housekeepers and nannies. He has up to 100 wet nurses on his books and works nationwide, matching clients who might be in New York with wet nurses as far away as Chicago. The agency then organises a phone interview, a face-to-face meeting and full medical checks, at the client's expense.

Once given the green light, the real fun starts, with the wet nurse moving in with the family for however long she is needed (usually between six and 18 months). Depending on the client, she might be fully integrated into the family, or asked to keep her distance and to wear a formal uniform. She'll generally have her own room in the house, often be provided with a car and her salary could be up to \$US1000–\$2000 [AUD1200–2400] a week.

Feinstock says he had no idea how popular wet-nursing would be until he first advertised it on his website three years ago. “Since we've been running the service, there's definitely been an increase in demand,” he reveals. According to Feinstock, it is actors, TV anchors and business people who are hiring wet nurses. “Some are celebrities, most are multimillionaires,” he reveals, “and wet-nursing is a very private profession.”

CHS recruits all its lactating women via the internet. Once placed, wet nurses must sign confidentiality agreements. Candidates are generally women aged 20–30, who have recently given birth to a first child, so they are already breastfeeding and continue to nurse their own baby as well as the client's. “Typically the woman will have never done it before and will be in need of money. A lot of them are single mothers, or women who have just lost their own baby,” adds Feinstock.

Would-be wet nurse Tabitha Trotter, 40, from San Diego, has recently signed up to CHS. She's been married for 20 years and has three children, Rick, 19, Samantha, 18, and Emma, four. In the last decade, she has given birth to seven surrogate babies, her most recent was born last December and now living with his genetic parents in Britain.

By wet-nursing standards, Tabitha is something of a prize lactator. By pumping four or five times a day, she expresses seven litres of milk a week. “Everybody finds it surprising how much milk I produce,” she laughs. “When my daughter comes back from university, she

demands to see the milk cartons in the refrigerator to make sure she knows which she's getting!”

At the moment, Tabitha freezes her milk and gives it to local families. “They come with cooler bags and take it home,” she explains. Any leftover milk she donates to a milk bank, which is run in a similar way to a sperm bank, where women can buy frozen breast milk.

Stay-at-home mum Tabitha first considered a wet-nursing career after reading about CHS in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* newspaper. “I decided to register on the website, I got a call and we've been discussing my options ever since,” she adds.

“When I breastfeed somebody else's child, it's a job. There's no counting eyelashes”

As Tabitha is married with a four-year-old, she doesn't plan to live-in as a wet nurse. “The best scenario for me is to pump milk, freeze it and provide it to a family daily or three times a week. I've told CHS I'm prepared to drive 50km a day to get to a client. I'll have to continue to pump milk until the agency contacts me to say I've been matched. I've no idea how much money I can make out of this, but it would be nice to be paid for my milk instead of just giving it away.”

Like all wet nurses, once employed, Tabitha will have to keep mum about her A-list bosses. “It'd be exciting to get close to a celebrity, but I've provided milk to celebrities before [the families of the surrogate babies I gave birth to] and I'm not a star-chaser, I'm a wet nurse. It's not my goal to enter 'that' world. My goal is to give the baby the healthiest beginning possible,” she explains.

While the idea of letting another woman's baby suckle seems bizarre to most of us, Tabitha has no qualms. “I've done it with friends' kids; I've done it with my sister's daughter. Once, a friend came to stay with me



and was having a hard time breastfeeding her four-month-old. She said to me, 'Please nurse my baby.' Even though my breasts were dry, after the baby latched on and sucked, the next day I was dripping breast milk. So we just kept passing the baby back and forth. She'd do the dinner and I'd nurse the baby.”

She also finds breastfeeding brings inner calm. “It makes me feel good mentally as it actually makes me sit down and relax. The dishes can wait. I just sit down and feed the baby. I love it.” So does she bond with the babies she feeds? “No, not unless it's my own, when I use breastfeeding as an opportunity to sing to her, talk to her, to marvel at all her tiny features. But when I breastfeed somebody else's child, it's a job. There's no counting eyelashes – I'm watching TV or reading.”

Showbusiness reporter Ashley Pearson isn't surprised a service like this has popped up in Hollywood. “Celebrities, more than anyone, are likely to want this kind of thing,” she claims. “What breastfeeding does to your breasts is no secret. You've got certain celebrities admitting that it has absolutely destroyed their breasts.” In a job where time equals megabucks, the sheer practicalities of breastfeeding don't make sense for many Tinseltown mums. “Pregnancy and everything that comes with it is a huge commitment, especially for a star, because it's a year of their lives that they can't work,” adds Pearson.

The difficulty for these actresses is that their 30s are often their busiest time and they simply don't want to miss out on opportunities. For some, such as Sarah Jessica Parker and Julia Roberts, that means delaying motherhood until the last minute; others choose adoption. “I think as more celebrities go down the adoption route, wet-nursing is going to become more necessary,” states Pearson. ▶





Tabitha Trotter, 40, who has three children of her own and has given birth to seven surrogate babies, became interested in wet-nursing after reading about it in a newspaper.

## us report

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“Many still want their children breastfed due to the proven advantages.”

Another reason experts cite is breast augmentation. LA is the cosmetic surgery capital of the world, leaving many of Hollywood's elite physically unable to breastfeed even if they wanted to. Leading UK cosmetic surgeon Norman Waterhouse, who specialises in breast augmentation, says, “If your implant is inserted via the nipple you stand more chance of dividing breast ducts, so it's possible you might have an impeded ability to breastfeed.” Many celebrities opt for this kind of implant, to reduce the amount of scarring, and Pearson points out that most Hollywood women have gone under the knife. “The vast majority of actresses have implants, even the ones who don't have very big breasts,” she reveals, “because implants keep the breasts high.”

Then there's the guilt felt over not breastfeeding. Considering the widespread scientific proof of the benefits of breast milk over formula, it's not altogether surprising that those who can be opting for breast milk – just not their own. Despite advances in formula milk, research points to breastfed babies having lower rates of infant mortality and growing up to be healthier children. Lactation consultant Katy Lebbing says breast milk is “massively healthier”, explaining that for every one breastfed baby hospitalised there are 10 formula

babies hospitalised. “People who don't want to [or can't] breastfeed – and who have the money to hire a wet nurse – will do so because they know it's giving their baby the best possible start in life,” she comments. “Sure, they could get milk from a milk bank but, like with anything, fresh is better than frozen.”

But there are health implications of hiring another woman to breastfeed your child. Gabrielle Palmer, author of *The Politics Of Breastfeeding* (Rivers Oram Press, \$21.95) warns anyone considering a wet nurse to do proper medical checks first. Regarding HIV, she says the only way to be completely safe is if your wet nurse remains celibate. “With HIV, if you are sexually active, you're at risk all the time,” she insists. And it's not just HIV. Hepatitis, TB, herpes and thrush, plus any drugs or medication the wet nurse is on, can be transmitted in her milk. “There has to be a great degree of trust, knowledge and responsibility when it comes to wet-nursing,” adds Palmer.

As well as medical issues, there are also psychological risks to consider, according to developmental psychologist Dr Nadja Reissland. “When you hire a wet nurse, that special breastfeeding bond between mother and baby is taken out of the equation,” she points out. “It's fine for a baby to develop close bonds



with more than one person, but if the mother ends up feeling inadequate or jealous of the wet nurse, those negative feelings could impact on the baby. Not to mention the emotional trauma that the baby and the wet nurse could suffer when she leaves the family.”

Where LA leads, Australia tends to follow. So could wet-nursing ever catch on over here? Bree Grigson, owner of The Wright Nanny Agency in Sydney, thinks not. “I couldn't imagine that ever being in demand here,” she admits. “And, in 12 years, I've certainly never been presented with that request!” Whether it remains that way, we can only see ...

### Nipping to the bank

In the US, a growing number of parents are buying breast milk from licensed banks – last year, the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) saw a 17 per cent rise in demand. But the service doesn't come cheap: the Mothers' Milk Bank in San José, California charges \$US3 per 30ml – nearly \$100 a day for a 6kg baby. Australian mothers seeking similar services have limited options – we're one of only a few countries that do not have a national donor human milk service. One of the first to fill this need is the Mothers Milk Bank on the Gold Coast, set up by midwife Marea Ryan and run as a non-profit organisation providing pasteurised breast milk to premature and needy babies.

### AN A-LISTER'S BABY TEAM

#### The baby planner

The planner helps the family choose a programme of antenatal classes and draws up a birth plan including a list of all the baby equipment the family might need to buy.

**\$250**  
PER HOUR

#### The childbirth educator

Advises the parents on all aspects of labour and delivery including antenatal nutrition, exercise, drugs/intervention, stages of labour and comfort-enhancing techniques.

**\$275**  
8-WEEK COURSE

#### The lactation educator

Shows the benefits of breastfeeding by using dolls and videos to demonstrate the best position to put the baby.

**\$85**  
3-HOUR CLASS

#### The lactation consultant

Someone who assesses your technique, helps with latch-on and diagnoses any problems.

**\$125**  
CONSULTATION

#### The birth doula

Helps the family by educating them before the birth and staying throughout labour. For example, if the mother wants a drug-free birth, the doula will help relax her using massage and visualisation.

**\$1200-**  
**\$2000**  
PER BIRTH

#### The post-partum doula

More of a helper than a nurse, she'll come into the home and help the new family bond. She'll often make meals, do light housekeeping and baby laundry. She'll also help the mother to understand the baby's cues.

**\$25-\$45**  
PER HOUR

#### The baby nurse

Often a registered nurse, her sole duty is to take care of the baby's needs. While mum rests, the nurse bathes, feeds, changes nappies, does the laundry and looks after the baby's room.

**\$25-\$45**  
PER HOUR