

MEDIA RELEASE

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**Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank celebrates 10 years of receiving liquid gold for Victoria’s sickest babies**

In the 10 years since opening its doors at Mercy Hospital for Women, more than 1000 sick and premature babies have been fed precious breastmilk donated by new mothers to the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank.

Today, grateful families, thriving children, generous breastmilk donors and committed Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank team members, including the Breastmilk Bank’s founder and current Director Dr Gillian Opie, will gather at Melbourne Zoo to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the service. The Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank is Victoria’s only breastmilk bank providing sick and premature babies in Melbourne’s neonatal intensive care units (NICU) with safe, screened and pasteurised milk.

Attending the 10-year celebration is Lenka Hlavacova, who in recent weeks has become the Breastmilk Bank’s most prolific donor, having donated an incredible 100 litres of milk. Lenka’s beautiful baby girl, Poppy, is currently unwell at the Royal Children’s Hospital but the devoted, big-hearted mum recognises what a precious gift breastmilk is for sick and pre-term babies.

“I think it is an amazing concept that my milk might be able to assist other unwell babies,” Lenka said. “I believe in karma and I just hope that by trying to do a good turn, it might also help Poppy.”

Also in attendance will be Stephanie Brebner and her daughter Abigail Brebner, who was the recipient of donated breastmilk when she was born at 28 weeks and three days at Mercy Hospital for Women. Abigail, now five years old, has a memorable and poignant middle name, her mum said.

“As we prepared for the emergency caesarean section at 28 weeks and three days, my husband and I were terrified,” Stephanie said. “We didn't know if our child would survive. At that moment, we decided to give her the middle name 'Hope' because we were so hopeful we would hear her cry, her heart would beat, and that she would one day thrive. We knew we were about to be in for the biggest fight of our lives.”

And thrive she did. Abigail started Prep this year and is a happy and active little girl. Stephanie will be forever grateful for the gift of donated breastmilk for her baby, and now, the professional photographer, regularly gives back to the hospital, photographing babies in the mercy Hospital for Women’s Neonatal Intensive Care Unit every Christmas.

“At the time of Abigail’s birth, I didn't know about all the benefits of breastmilk and was a bit hesitant to use another mother’s milk to feed my child,” Stephanie said. “But then and there I knew I wanted to give my daughter the best chance at a happy and healthy life so agreed to receive the milk.

“We are so grateful and want to say a huge thank you to the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank and all the breastmilk donors for giving my daughter your liquid gold, your time and generosity, and the best possible start in life."

Founder of the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank, Dr Gillian Opie, said the aim of the service is to make sure every child has the best start in life.

“When a mother’s own supply is low, donor breastmilk is the next best option,” she said. “It has unique infection-fighting proteins that are not available in infant formula and human breastmilk is easier for a baby to digest than formula produced from the milk of animals or plants. We want every baby to have the best start in life.”

The Mercy Breastmilk Bank is hoping to further expand the service across Victoria and needs to purchase much-needed equipment, including freezers and pasteurising machines, to make that possible. Donations to the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank Appeal can be made through the Mercy Health Foundation, www.mercyhealthfoundation.org.au

**Facts and figures:**

Since opening in 2011, the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank has had 425 milk donors provide 4,232 litres of breastmilk to 1,018 recipients?

In 2020 alone, the Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank fed 161 sick babies and premature babies.

The Mercy Health Breastmilk Bank at Mercy Hospital for Women in Heidelberg in 2011. In 2019, the service expanded, opening satellite sites at Monash Children’s Hospital and the Royal Children’s Hospital. A site at The Royal Women’s Hospital opened in 2020.

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