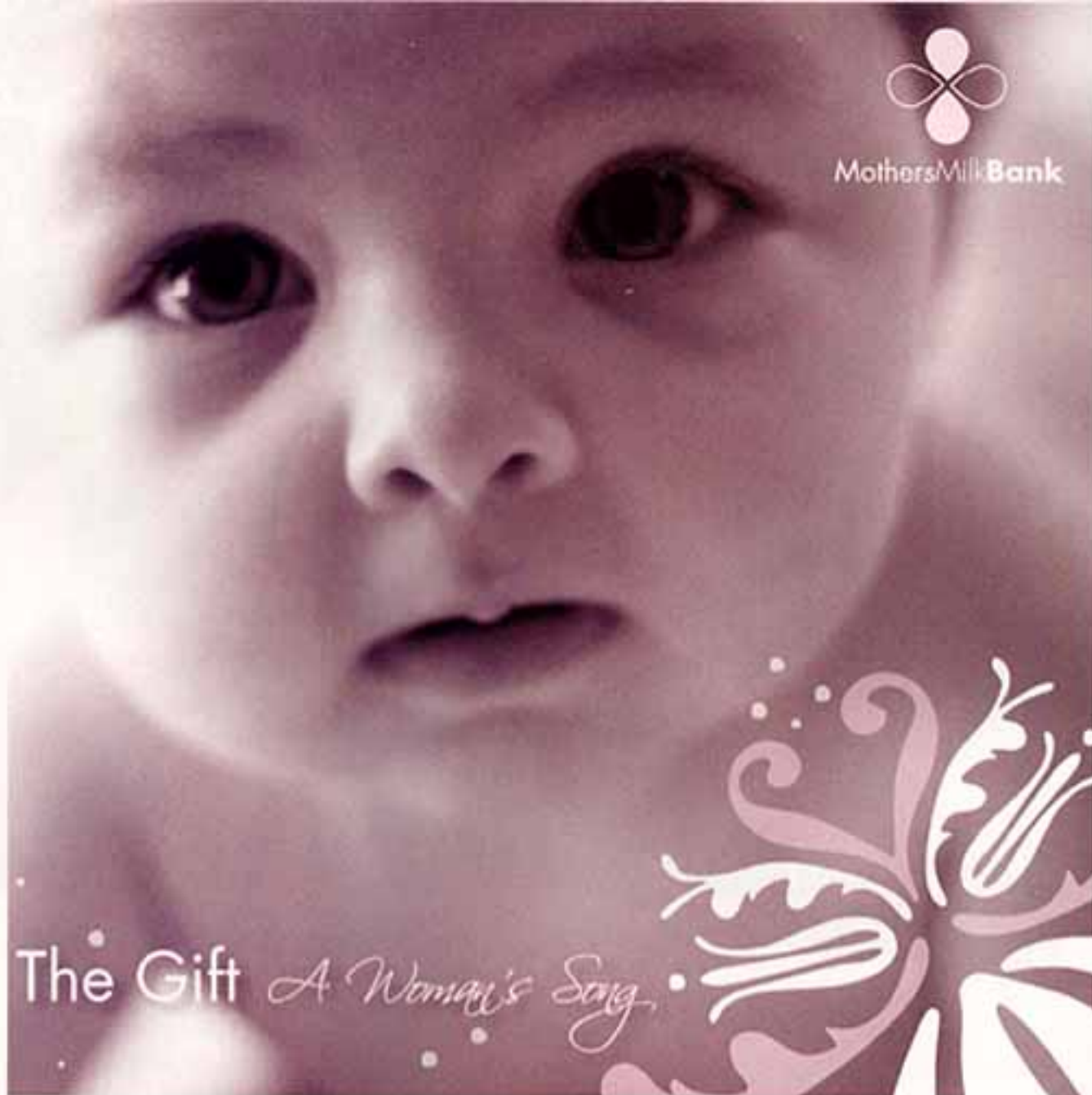


A breast milk bank could help sick and pre-term babies on the Sunshine Coast, **Janine Hill** writes



MothersMilkBank

Birth of a great idea



The Gift *A Woman's Song*

If midwife Marea Ryan achieves her dream of establishing a breast milk bank at the John Flynn Hospital at Tugun, Gold Coast mothers and babies will not be the only ones to benefit.

IVF service City Fertility has come on board with the project, and Marea foresees that its IVF centres will be able to act as pick-up and distribution points for donated breast milk throughout different regions.

This means that Sunshine Coast mothers would be able to deliver breast milk donations locally, and the Coast's hospitals would be able to pick up supplies to nurture pre-term or sick infants.

Rewind to that unfamiliar idea of a breast milk bank. Well, if you can bank sperm, eggs, corneas and blood, why not breast milk?

In fact, Australia lags behind many other countries - England, France, the United States, Canada and Brazil, for instance - in not banking breast milk.

"I guess nobody's picked up the ball and run with it," Marea says of Australia's lack of a breast milk bank.

Marea picked up the ball two years ago and has been running with it ever since, now with a team of like-minded women around her.

They are running "neck and neck" with a similar project in Western Australia, but it is not a race to see which will be the first in Australia, just a race to help sick and pre-term infants.

The short story is that breast milk is better for pre-term babies, whose digestive systems are not ready to cope with other foods.

According to the Mother's Milk Bank,

breast milk benefits infants who fail to thrive, who have malabsorption or metabolic disorders, or who have "short gut" syndrome, renal failure, cardiac problems or infection.

It has also been shown to prevent necrotising enterocolitis, where the lining of the intestinal wall of pre-term infants dies.

According to Marea, pre-term babies fed breast milk spend about two weeks less in neo-natal care than they otherwise might, and, in a language that she hopes will speak to health authorities' ears, that equates to a health-care saving of about \$18,000 a baby.

Marea says sick and pre-term infants are often unable to have breast milk because their mothers are too ill themselves. On the other hand, healthy mothers with healthy children sometimes pour perfectly good breast milk down the drain.

"In 2004, about 4000 pre-term babies needed breast milk in Queensland, and about 8000 babies in total," she says.

Marea says a breast milk bank is not about turning breast-feeding mothers into milking cows, but about keeping a little bit extra breast milk for someone who could really need it.

"If a woman expresses just once a day, it's only 10 minutes," she says. "If she does that for five days, tricks the body into producing an extra feed a day, that's five feeds a week. She can put that in the freezer and deliver it once a week to the bank."

Banked breast milk is pasteurised to prevent any illness being transmitted from a donor to a baby.

"In South Africa, the women express and take their milk to the milk bank to have it pasteurised so that HIV isn't passed on to the children through the milk," Marea says.

The Mothers Milk Bank already has

premises in the John Flynn Medical Centre, near the John Flynn Hospital at Tugun, and has some equipment, including a \$60,000 pasteurisation machine which is ready to be used, once it is paid for.

S&N Pathology has donated its testing services to ensure the milk is free of disease and fit for consumption.

All that stands in the way of Marea and the milk bank making a difference in the lives of mothers and babies is money. The Mothers Milk Bank team is trying to raise \$350,000 to get it up and running.

"If I had the money, we could be up and running in four weeks," Marea said.

To reach the \$350,000 goal, the Mothers Milk Bank has released a fundraising CD, *The Gift*, featuring songs donated by a who's who of Australian artists and musicians, such as Stringmansassy, Deborah Conway, Delta Goodrem and Katie Noonan.

Many of them donated their songs at the request of Marea, who moonlights as a live entertainment photographer and has chatted to them personally about the milk bank project.

"As I've gone around in the last two years, I've told them what I've been working on. When I've asked them if they'd like to donate a song, they've said yes. In the end, we had too many people."

The CD, which also features ABC radio personality Nadia Sunde in her other role as a singer-songwriter, will be launched at a concert on the Gold Coast on May 27 but is already available in ABC shops for \$30, of which \$24 goes to the milk bank.

"If we sold 15,000 of them, we'd have our money," Marea says.

Music to your ears can become mother's milk, if you want it to.