Professionalisation of a Breastfeeding Peer Support Service
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1 Introduction:
Through one-to-one interviews and focus groups with Breastfeeding Network ‘Star Buddies’ peer supporters in the North-West of England, this study presents new insights concerning the professionalisation of breastfeeding peer support. We illuminate the difficulties, tensions and anxieties faced by peer supporters when their role changed from a voluntary to a more professional-based position within formalised healthcare services.

2 Background:
In May 2008, the Breastfeeding Network, a national breastfeeding charity, was commissioned by an NHS trust to provide a comprehensive model of peer support across the pre-natal period; named the Star Buddies Service. This service is primarily provided by 11 paid Star Buddies (all of whom previously provided support in a voluntary capacity), and is supported by voluntary peer supporters.

3 Methodology:
A qualitative, semi-structured schedule was developed which explored difficulties and facilitators faced when delivering the peer support service in hospital and in the community. Analysis was undertaken using Thematic network analysis (Attride-Sterling,2001), supported by the MAXQDA qualitative software package.

4 Findings:
Interview transcripts highlighted recurrent issues in terms of tensions and anxieties specifically relating to difficulties the peer supporters faced when their roles, boundaries and remit changed. Thematic network analysis (Attride-Sterling, 2001) revealed one global theme (Professionalising breastfeeding peer support) three organising themes (Visibility and communication; Roles and boundaries; Guardianship of knowledge) and several basic themes. The organising and basic themes illuminate issues concerning peer supporters lack of personal and professional identity and how communication difficulties with staff led them to feel like ‘outsiders’; the tensions experienced in meeting targets against an altruistic desire to support women and concerns over the enforced accountability of case recordings; the difficulties they experienced through competing and undermining practices; professional and personal difficulties experienced through service constraints and health professionals’ “gate-keeping” access to women and the extent to which peer supporter’s skills/knowledge was under or even over-utilised by staff.

5 Conclusion:
Despite this study being undertaken within a specific time frame, the findings suggest that there are numerous tensions that existed when the breastfeeding peer support role was professionalised. Care needs to be paid to transitional difficulties as peer supporters move from a voluntary to a more professional position within maternity care.

Overview of global, organising and basic themes