

#SundayWiMIN23 Week 3: Dr Sarah Brennan

Dr Brennan is a GP with an interest in Women's Health and Breastfeeding Medicine, and Assistant Professor in the Department of General Practice at the Donegal Medical Academy.

Sarah graduated in 1998 from UCD Medical School, and after completing her BST in Surgery in 2001 completed her GP training Scheme in Donegal and became a member of the Irish College of General Practitioners in 2008. Sarah now works as a General Practitioner with interest in women's health and Breastfeeding medicine and as an assistant professor in University of Galway from which she is currently on sabbatical to develop her Breastfeeding Medicine Practice. She is mother to five boys, aged from 9 to 21 years and a fluffy 2 year old goldendoodle!

Experiences of medicine, lecturing, mindfulness, womanhood, breastfeeding and mothering have helped Sarah develop an interest in women's health, pregnancy, birthing and breastfeeding practices that promote optimised female health and mother-infant wellbeing and development. She has conducted qualitative research exploring breastfeeding experiences of African mothers living in Ireland from whom she also learned so much about breastfeeding and its potential. She serves as a member the Donegal Breastfeeding Forum and CHO1 (Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Monaghan and Cavan) Regional Integrated Infant Feeding Committee, working to create environments in health care settings and the community that promote, protect and support breastfeeding. Recently she has been invited to be the ICGP representative on the National Baby Friendly Initiative Oversight Committee, which aims to create Maternity care that complies with the [UNICEF 10 steps to successful breastfeeding](#), an evidence-based strategy to improve initiation and continuation rates of breastfeeding

Sarah both loves and fears public speaking – but feels when it comes to women's health and breastfeeding it is imperative that we, as medics, speak up and share knowledge and experiences that can positively influence our society. She is often invited to speak on local radio. In 2019 she participated in the [Soapbox Ireland Event](#) in Galway on 'The Marvels of Human Milk'. In 2017 she participated in the [Famelab competition](#) with a talk entitled 'Can Oxytocin reverse a self-destructing civilisation?' of course the answer to which is yes, as it is the main hormone in breastfeeding, bonding, caring compassion and love.

In her role as a lecturer, she facilitated a Special Study Module for medical students in Infant Nutrition, which she has presented at national and international conferences. She has co-developed (with Letterkenny's lactation consultant) Undergraduate Breastfeeding Education as part of a General Practice Women's health workshop. She is collaborating with medical students and colleagues from each of the 8 medical schools in Ireland on research exploring Breastfeeding Education on Undergraduate Medical Education Programmes. Preliminary findings from this research have informed recommendation for the broader inclusion of Breastfeeding Education and clinical exposure on University of Galway's medical curriculum which is currently undergoing extensive review.

Sarah advocates for the inclusion of breastfeeding education also on post graduate courses and among established Physicians. She hopes to collaborate on research among trainee GPs to assess infant feeding learning needs and with a view to supporting development of infant feeding programmes for GP training schemes in Ireland. She completed the [UCD level 9 Breastfeeding and Lactation course](#), directed by Dr Denise McGuinness. Sarah has been invited to develop a Breastfeeding Quick Reference Guide for General Practitioners by the ICGP. Sarah is a member of the ICGP Council who voted in 2021 to accept the motion to cease acceptance of Infant formula funding for their monthly publication '*Forum*' and to develop GP breastfeeding education. She is a member of the [Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine](#), an international group of physicians who practice breastfeeding medicine who support each other with educational conferences, [breastfeeding medicine protocols](#) and online forums.

Over the years Sarah has worked to build University of Galway's capacity for research in Human Milk Science and in Breastfeeding. She is collaborating on research with colleagues in Health Economics to show that Breastfeeding is a cost-effective intervention in Ireland, with a view to increasing institutional and governmental investment in initiatives to create an environment that espouses equity of breastfeeding choice and support. Along with Dr Ian Stewart, in Behavioural psychology and Dr James Connolly, Computing Lecturer, ATU, Letterkenny, they are supervising a student to explore Breastfeeding Implicit Bias among Health Care professionals. Sarah also hopes to develop research into MicroRNA in breastmilk, the most abundant source of these interesting molecules that regulate up to 60% of gene expression at a post transcriptional level.

Sarah loves that Art can generate conversation around Breastfeeding and other health topics which are not commonly spoken about. Such conversations help to normalise breastfeeding and all aspects of women's health among the public. With this in mind, she, along with GUH Arts trust, HRB Mother and Child and the Medical School's Athena SWAN committee, invited the CREATE exhibition, about Motherhood, Birth and Beyond to come to GUH, CSI and research institutes. Since then a print of one of the pieces, Fiona Carey's 'Breastfeeding Everywhere' is permanently on show at the Donegal Medical Academy. Helen Hancock, a Glass Artist, has shown her piece entitled 'Nature Does not Bloom in Private' in the Donegal Medical Academy. This piece features three breasts blown from molten glass infused with human milk.

She also has an interest in mindfulness and its capacity to optimise well-being among medical students, pregnant mothers and partners and thus the whole community. Sarah co-developed the Mindfulness Special Study Module for medical students in University of Galway in 2017, which ran for 4 years and led to the creation of a School of Medicine well-being module, an iteration of which will be an important part of the revised curriculum. She completed a UCD Masters in Mindfulness in June 2020, and since then facilitates mindfulness courses to students. She recently received a scholarship to undertake the [Mindfulness Based Childbirth and Pregnancy programme](#) and will soon start delivering mindfulness courses to pregnant moms and their partners. In future she is keen to explore mindfulness' effect on mothers' well-being, pregnancy delivery outcomes, breastfeeding implicit bias and initiation rates.

Sarah serves as a medical representative on the [Baby Feeding Law Group Ireland \(BFLGI\)](#) Steering Committee. The BFLGI aim to see the full implementation of [the Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes](#) to protect all mothers, babies and their families from biased Breast Milk Substitute advertisement that negatively affect infant feeding choice and capacity to continue breastfeeding as evidenced by recent [WHO and UNICEF research](#). The full enactment and enforcement of the code would ensure factual and unbiased promotion, protection and support of Breastfeeding. Sarah was invited to talk at the 2021 launch of the HSE's Code Policy for health care settings and also at the RCPI's Paediatric Facility's Breastfeeding Seminar Series in November 2021. Recently, as part of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill Subgroup, she worked with other BFLGI members and WHO officials to successfully advocate to Senators, departmental officers and TDs influential in the drawing up of the final bill, for the inclusion of amendments which will see the commissioner regulate the online advertisement of commercial milk formulae. This bill, with these amendments, was accepted by the Dáil and signed into law by the president before Christmas. This is a momentous achievement for Ireland and one which will have impact akin to the Tobacco Act that Ireland bravely pioneered. The BFLGI look forward to being consulted in the drawing of the regulations that will be developed by the Commissioner and his office.

She is also a member of the recently-established [GP Infant feeding Network Ireland \(GPIFNI\)](#) which runs an Infant Feeding Discussion Forum on Facebook and is open to new members.

Nuair ná mbíonn Sarah ag obair táitníonn go mór léi beith ag snámh san fharríage agus sna locha deasa atá thart uilig an áit i nDun Na nGall leis na Gartan Open Water Swimmers(GOWS). Déanann sí Yoga agus Mindfulness. Taitníonn an Gaeilge go mór léi fásta. Is as Gaoth Dobhair a fear céile agus bíonn na buachaillí ag freastail ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Déanann sí iarracht labhairt Gaeilge lena othair. Tá sí ag trúth le imeachtaí cothú cíche i 2023.

In her spare time Sarah loves to swim in the open waters of Donegal, do yoga and mindfulness practice to keep balance and perspective in her busy world. She is excited for 2023 which promises to be a great year for Breastfeeding Advocacy, with the launch and publication of the Lancet Breastfeeding Series which will include the influence of commercial milk formula companies on infant feeding.

