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Response

We're not trying to undermine the baby-milk code

Nestlé is committed to the health of mothers and infants in the developing world, says Hilary Parsons

Hilary Parsons
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Joanna Moorhead's report on infant-formula marketing in Bangladesh failed to highlight a single violation by Nestlé of the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes (Milking it, G2, May 15). Indeed, she herself doesn't believe that we are in breach. Instead, by presenting contacts with health professionals - permitted under the code - as "aggressive" marketing, the article claimed that Nestlé is exploiting grey areas.

For example, Save the Children alleges that Nestlé gives health professionals pictures of Lactogen to pass on to mothers in order to get around the code's prohibition of direct contacts between mothers and companies. The article describes these leaflets as "to all intents and purposes flyers for the product concerned". But giving information to health workers is permitted by the code.

Had the article illustrated a copy of one of our so-called flyers, readers may have been more sceptical of the assertion of exploitation.

Nestlé sells three types of Lactogen in Bangladesh. The products have different formulations and feeding frequency. Should an infant consume the wrong product, this would have an adverse effect on the child's health. The leaflets are essentially a safety measure to ensure that the right product is bought for a child of the corresponding age and that the mother understands how frequently she should feed the child.

Featured prominently on the front of the leaflets is the statement: "Nothing is a substitute for or equivalent or superior to breastmilk." Though the author states that she saw no evidence of Nestlé-sponsored pro-breastfeeding literature, on the back is important advice for mothers including information on breastfeeding, a warning that partial bottlefeeding can have a negative effect on breastfeeding, and advice that the costs of infant formula should be borne in mind before deciding to use it. This does not sound much like a flyer!

The article also highlights the fact that a cake and a plastic pen were given to health professionals - as if such items would persuade the paediatricians of Bangladesh to endanger babies' lives by recommending infant formula over breastfeeding. Incidentally, the pen illustrated alongside the article does not promote an infant formula but mentions NIDO, a milk powder for general family use.

Far from trying to get around the code, in developing countries, Nestlé voluntarily applies the entire WHO code - whether the government does or not. In fact, Nestlé is the only major infant-food company in developing countries which: does not give free supplies of infant formula to

hospitals; refrains from marketing cereals and baby foods for infants younger than six months; and does not advertise follow-on formula (for infants more than six months of age).

This is the action of a company committed to improving the health and nutrition of mothers and infants, rather than one trying to exploit grey areas of the code.

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