



Protect Promote Support  
Breastfeeding

## EMERGING TRENDS



**THE NETWORK**

Association for Rational Use of Medication in Pakistan



## 17 years of disregard

Seventeen years after the adoption of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and two years after the adoption of the SAARC Code for the Protection of Breastfeeding and Young Child Nutrition, the infant food industry continues to show utter disregard for these international agreements which regulate the marketing of infant foods and feeding products.

Pakistan was one of 118 countries which in May 1981 adopted the International Code through a World Health Assembly Resolution. It has also adopted WHA Resolutions on infant feeding every two years since then. In August 1996 Pakistan hosted a SAARC ministerial conference at which all seven member countries adopted the SAARC Code.

A proposed law, the Protection of Breastfeeding and Young Child Nutrition Act, is being prepared by the Ministry of Health to bring legal force to these codes in Pakistan. It is hoped that this Act will be enacted in 1998.

## Emerging trends

Not a single company marketing infant foods or feeding products in Pakistan is abiding by the International Code or the SAARC Code in their entirety. Year after year the industry evolves and introduces new tactics in its quest for profit.

The following emerging marketing strategy trends establish the urgent need for the proposed law. They are only a few of the alarming findings of a nationwide monitoring survey conducted by The Network in March 1997.

Promotion of so-called "specialty formulas" (for premature babies, lactose-free, soya, etc.) is expanding the demand for these products far beyond the legitimate need for them. Companies marketing these products in Pakistan erroneously behave as though these products are not covered by the International Code or the SAARC Code. Many doctors interviewed during The Network's survey shared this belief. Many manufacturers use their company name as their

product name or as the root of their product name. Morinaga's Morinaga BF, Snow P7A, Meiji's Meiji FU and Meiji's Meiji FMT, Celia's Celia 1, Nestle's Nestle Rice and Nestle Wheat and Nutricia's Nutrilon are just few examples available in Pakistan. Company and product name similarity reinforces both in the minds of mothers.

It is to place their name at the front of the consumer's mind that any company sponsors various events. Infant food manufacturers have sponsored such wholesome activities as puppet shows, baby shows and television programs and visited schools with free samples of products not covered by the International Code or the SAARC Code. The consumer's familiarity with the company name pays off in their brand selection and loyalty.

Products not covered by the International Code or the SAARC Code (such as foods, drinks, candies, etc.) are being used as a front to gain access to health workers and mothers and as incentives. Nestle, with its diverse product line, is particularly well placed to play this marketing game. For example, in many hospitals surveyed Nestle supplied its tea whitener for staff "tea clubs", and doctors could ask the company rep. to supply fruit drinks and candies for their children's birthday parties. This largess bolsters doctor loyalty to the company.

Label designs and product names within a company line are often very similar, creating potential for confusion among consumers. (In Pakistan only 50% of fathers and 24% of mothers can read.) The Nutricia Cow & Gate product line, Nestle's Lactogen 1 and Lactogen 2 and its cereal product lines, and Abbott's Isomil and Similac are examples. Confusion of infant formulas and follow-on milks can be hazardous for the infant's health due to their different nutrient contents.

Similar labels make it easy for consumers to buy at least one of the company's products, if not the right one. Also, when it comes time to choose a follow-up milk, mothers will favor one that resembles the formula they have been using. Cereals are intensely promoted for use from four months of age, whereas WHO and UNICEF recom-

mend exclusive breastfeeding for about six months. Companies mistakenly act as though cereals intended for use from four months of age are not covered by the International Code or the SAARC Code.

Intense promotional campaigns for cereal products keep the company name in the minds of consumers and establish an association with infant feeding. Advertisements in newspapers and magazines and on TV contain misleading information. Samples are freely distributed directly to mothers and through doctors and other health workers (at vaccination centers, for example).

Milks for pregnant and lactating mothers are being used to gain access to mothers and to associate the company name with infants and infant feeding. While these products are not covered by either the International Code or the SAARC Code, their promotion can undermine breastfeeding and should be restricted before it reaches the rampant levels observed in other Asian countries.

Having had her pregnancy medicalised and nutrition source pre-packaged, a mother is more likely to opt for bottle feeding if she encounters difficulties breastfeeding. She is likely to remain loyal to the manufacturer of the supplement she has been using when choosing a formula to feed her infant.

Also, these supplements may weaken a mother's confidence in her natural ability to satisfy her baby's nutritional needs. She may be led to believe that if she is unable to afford such supplements, she will not be healthy enough to breastfeed her infant.

## Tried, tested and true

Many of the tried and tested tactics are still in circulation. Direct promotion to mothers is not central to the infant food industry's selling strategies, although they are sometimes approached directly. It is much more efficient to win the loyalty of a doctor who in the course of her/his career may recommend that company's products to thousands of mothers. Loyalty is won through gifts (dish antennas, Umra tickets and birthday and anniversary presents), product samples, medical equipment, stationary (letter-



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heads, personalized prescription pads), sponsorship to conduct or participate in conferences and seminars within Pakistan and abroad.

Labels of "breastmilk substitutes" continue to be confusing and deceptive in their design and textual content. While infant photos were found on the labels of two brands of infant formula, the labels of many other brands bear illustrations and/or graphics which idealize the use of the product and/or discourage breastfeeding.

No effort is made to abide by the provisions of the SAARC Code. The label information required by the International Code is either absent or manipulated in such a way as to discourage breastfeeding.

The information on several labels appeared in English only, with not a single word of Urdu (one was almost entirely in Russian, with only a few words in English!). Other brands translated portions of the label, but not the ingredients and nutritional information, while a few included only the feeding table in Urdu as an insert under the lid.

Feeding bottle and teat manufacturers promotional campaigns ignore all provisions of the International Code and the SAARC Code. Almost all brands show infant photos on their labels, while many packages have window panels to show the colourful and enticing designs on the product inside.

Cartons can be opened to serve as a tempting display of the individual product boxes. Posters and mobiles commonly hang in shops. Advertisements also appear in newspapers and magazines, on billboards and illuminated pole signs, and on TV and across the screen during video recorded Indian and Pakistani movies.

## Taming the beast

The infant food industry will continue to find new marketing strategies. New products will be developed, old ones repackaged and fresh methods of targeting consumers (especially mothers) tested. Loopholes and weaknesses in the International Code will be exploited, the stronger SAARC Code will be ignored.

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For Pakistan to protect its weakest citizens -- its babies and young children -- it is imperative that strong legislation based on the SAARC Code be implemented without delay. The Ministry of Health is to be commended for its firm stand against attempts to weaken and delay the proposed law.

It is time to stop "reacting" to unethical marketing and start taking "proactive" action to avert damage to our breastfeeding culture. While The Network has vowed to continue to monitor the excesses of the baby food industry, we hope the point of reference in the next monitoring exercise will be a national law, and not just Codes.



## THE NETWORK

Association for Rational Use of Medication in Pakistan

House # 60-A, Street 39, F-10/4, Islamabad-Pakistan

Tel: 92-51-281755, Fax: 92-51-291552

e-mail: [zafar@arump.sdnpc.undp.org](mailto:zafar@arump.sdnpc.undp.org)

e-mail: [arump@isb.comsats.net.pk](mailto:arump@isb.comsats.net.pk)



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