Follow-on formulas: are they necessary? should they be promoted?

The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1981, prohibits the promotion of all breastmilk substitutes and “any food being marketed or otherwise represented as a partial or total replacement for breast milk, whether or not suitable for that purpose.”

Follow-on milks were invented by companies following the adoption of the International Code in a cynical strategy to get round the Code’s restrictions. Tobacco companies have used similar strategies, for example creating high street holiday firms with the same brand name as cigarettes. Concern about the promotion of these milks caused the World Health Assembly to pass a Resolution (WHA Res 39.28) in 1986 describing these milks as ‘not necessary’.

When follow-on milks were first introduced into the UK in the mid 1980s their promotion caused much confusion and many very young babies were fed on them. There was an outcry from health professionals who feared a return to the days of National Dried Milk with a high solute load, causing babies to suffer hypernatraemia. The rationale for follow-on milks put forward at the time by European Scientists (ESPGHAN) was mainly economic - it was thought that when an infant moves onto complementary feeding highly refined and expensive infant formulas are not necessary. But low prices exacerbate the problem by encouraging early use. Today the product retails at a high price but money-off coupons, discounts and prizes are offered - the very worst option! In addition the marketing relies heavily on health claims, promoting the supposed benefits of extra iron etc. These claims have yet to be proven - much of the research (funded by industry) compares follow on milks with cow’s milk rather than infant formula. Indeed high amounts of iron added to formulas pose several risks for infants. There is less iron present in breastmilk, but it is much better absorbed by the baby. European scientists are now urging caution and recommending several changes to follow-on milks, bringing their composition closer to infant formulas. The nutritional need for follow-on milks remains a mystery. The commercial advantage is clear.

The World Health Assembly recommends that infants be exclusively breastfed for 6 months with continued breastfeeding for up to 2 years of age or beyond. Any substance replacing that part of the child’s diet best provided by breastmilk during this period is, therefore, a breastmilk substitute.

FOLLOW ON MILK PROMOTION IN THE UK

Below, left and centre: Milupa’s advertisements in Pregnancy and Birth magazine for parents (April/May 2004) imply that its Aptamil formula is equivalent to mother’s milk. The Aptamil package itself promotes the whole range of milks: 1, 2 and 3. The only identification is the highlighted number. Below, right: A similar advertisement appears in RCM Midwives Journal (December 2003), but here the 1 and 2 are highlighted on the pack shots. Close examination of the advertisements and packs reveals a difference between the baby image shown. Where the pack is formula number 3, the figure is an human infant. Where it is number 1 (the infant formula) the figure is a humanized bear. All violate the International Code. The adverts blatantly promote ‘prebiotics’ ingredients that have not yet been proven to be effective or safe in formulas.
In 1984 when Wyeth introduced follow-on milks to the UK (labelled as suitable from 4 months) there was an outcry from health professionals. Prof Michael Crawford of London Zoo analysed some samples. He said they were more like Rhinoceros milk than human milk. Wyeth eventually changed the labelling to 6 months.

Article 9.6.5 of the draft revised Codex Standard on infant formula calls for labelling which avoids any risk of confusion between infant formulas and follow-on formulas.

This Briefing paper is prepared by Baby Milk Action in June 2004. For further information about the campaign to bring the European Directives into line with UN recommendations contact:
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