

IGBM Interagency Group on Breastfeeding Monitoring

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CRACKING THE CODE: AGENCIES SUSPEND DISCUSSIONS WITH INFANT FORMULA MANUFACTURERS

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The Interagency Group on Breastfeeding Monitoring (IGBM) - a coalition of Churches, academic institutions, experts in infant feeding and leading international NGOs - has announced in a letter to the infant food industry that further discussion or meetings aimed at an agreed methodology to monitor adherence to the World Health Organisation (WHO) International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes would be pointless at the present time.

Almost exactly a year ago, in January 1997, independent research published by IGBM revealed that leading manufacturers of baby milk and associated feeding products were violating the WHO Code. Such practices undermine the proven health benefits of breastfeeding and put infant lives at risk.

The first reaction of the formula manufacturers was to seek to cast doubt on the validity of the research. Since then IGBM has challenged the industry through its representative body, the International Association of Infant Food Manufacturers (IFM) to produce a draft protocol which, once agreed, could form a standard methodology to apply in all countries.

The most recent communication from IFM, however, sets out two "unequivocal" principles which make further discussion futile.

(i) IFM insists that implementation of the Code is a matter of national government legislation. IGBM maintains the WHO and UNICEF position that the legitimacy of the International Code and subsequent resolutions must be accepted whether or not individual national legislative statutes exist.

(ii) IFM insists that industry has an equal responsibility with all other interested parties to collaborate with governments in monitoring the application of the Code. IGBM reminds the IFM that Article 11.3 of the Code sets out an independent responsibility for the industry to monitor its own marketing practices.

The following organisations have made a financial or other contribution to the research carried out by IGBM:

Ajahma Charitable Trust

The Baptist Union of Great Britain

Bishop of Coventry

British Association of Community Child Health (BACCH)

Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD)

Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR)

Centre for International Child Health, Institute of Child Health, London

Charity Projects

Children's Aid Direct

Christian Aid

Church of England, Board for Social Responsibility

Church of Scotland, Church and Nation Committee

Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches

International Child Health Group

Methodist Church

Mothers' Union

Oxiam UK/1

Rádda Barnen

Save the Children - UK

Tear Fund UK

UK Committee for UNICEF

UNICEF, Regional Office for CEE/CIS

United Reformed Church (Church and Society)

VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas)

World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe

World Council of Churches

World Vision UK

The report has benefitted from the individual advice and support of:

Dr Martin Kirkpatrick
Dr Tony Waterston
Dr Anthony Williams

The full text of IGBM's letter reads:

"Thank you for your letter of 2 December 1997, with the comments that you provided from IFM and Mr Rothman. IGBM members had extensive discussions at a meeting on 12 December, and subsequently, in the search for a clear positive basis for a fruitful meeting between our two organisations.

We were disappointed therefore to read in your letter of your "unequivocal" insistence that "the practical implementation of the principles and aim of the International code [should be] appropriate to the social and legislative context of the country in question."

We would like to remind you that on 9 July 1991, Dr Hiroshi Nakajima of WHO and Mr James Grant of UNICEF, wrote to the president of IFM stating that "It is the position of WHO and UNICEF that the adoption of and adherence to the International code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in its entirety in all countries is a minimum requirement and only one of several important actions required in order to protect healthy practices in respect of infant and young child feeding." This clearly separates "good practice" from legislative statutes in relation to the Code. Your unequivocal insistence on a different principle, i.e. that the Code is only as real as the legislative context of the country in question, is as unacceptable to us as it is to WHO and UNICEF.

The other point of "unequivocal" principle in your letter, namely that "all the interested parties be given *equal* responsibility to collaborate with governments in monitoring the application of the Code, including industry", leaves aside the independent responsibility set out in the Code (Article 11.3) for industry to monitor its own practices.

When you are able to move to a position where you accept the legitimacy of the International Code and subsequent resolutions as they stand, whether or not there are legislative statutes at a national level, we may be able to make further progress towards holding a meeting with you. Until that time, it is clear that your position is so at variance with ours in terms of acceptance of the International Code that there are, at present, no grounds for embarking on further discussion or meetings. Indeed, further discussion on methodologies for assessment of violations of the Code must wait until agreement is achieved that the International Code is an undisputed basic reference point for any such study.

You will appreciate that we have not come to this decision lightly. We urge you to reconsider your position with regard to these essential points."

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For further information, please contact: UNICEF Press Office on 0171 430 0162