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Report shames lax UK formula marketing regulations as Italy prepares to take action to protect breastfeeding and babies fed on formula

IBFAN, the International Baby Food Action Network, has released an illustrated report Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules 2007 on multinational companies violating rules on marketing adopted by the World Health Assembly (WHA) (1).

The 150-page report gives graphic details of the insidious ways in which a dozen heavyweight companies (2) compete with mother’s milk.

Aggressive marketing in the UK by companies such as NUMICO (owners of Milupa and Cow & Gate brands), Wyeth (owner of the SMA brand), Heinz (owner of the Farley’s brand) and Hipp features heavily in the report as the lax marketing regulations appear to make the country a test-bed.

Right: The NUMICO profile highlights how health workers and parents are targeted directly by company representatives in the UK.

Member States of the European Union are revising regulations on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes following a new EU Directive, which has the aim of implementing the WHA International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Patti Rundall OBE, Policy Director at Baby Milk Action and co-author of the report Protecting breastfeeding – Protecting babies fed on formula’ submitted to the UK government consultation on behalf of the UK coalition, the Baby Feeding Law Group, said:

“It is shameful that so many of the innovations in aggressive marketing are coming from the UK. A broad coalition representing all the leading health professional and lay organisations are unanimous in calling for the Code and Resolutions to be implemented for the sake of all babies – those who are breastfed and those who are fed on formula. Even the government’s own advisors, SACN, are calling for stronger regulations. We welcome the fact that Italy plans to include in its legislation important provisions of the Code, such as a ban on the promotion of follow-on milks and controls of sponsored information. We call on our Government to listen to its advisors and set a positive example to other countries instead of caving in to the industry and undermining them.”

On 21 November the Government suggested it would not introduce measures called for by the Baby Feeding Law Group and its own Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, unlike Italy, which planning to introduce some measures. Dr. Adriano Cattaneo, epidemiologist and president of
IBFAN Italy and coordinator of the EU-funded projects for a Blueprint for Action for the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding, said:

“The report demonstrates why governments have to show the courage to regulate the baby food industry. I am pleased that the Italian government’s draft regulations implementing a new European Union Directive will ban follow-on formula advertising and I hope that other nations in Europe and elsewhere will support this action and close this and other loopholes in their own countries.”

The global monitoring report contains results from 67 countries where companies were evaluated against World Health Assembly marketing requirements introduced since 1981. The report shows that Nestlé, the target of an international boycott and dominant market player, continues widespread violations. It also reveals that the failure to regulate such practices has encouraged other companies, such as the huge NUMICO group (1), to use similar practices to obtain what NUMICO calls ‘stomach share’ (3) from competitors and from breastfeeding. With NUMICO entering into strong competition with Nestlé in the Asian market, the monitoring has found its violations have increased to rival those of Nestlé. This could provoke consumer action, such as the widely supported Nestlé boycott.

Yeong Joo Kean, Legal Advisor to IBFAN and co-author of the report, said:

“The marketing of infant formula, follow-on formula, complementary foods and feeding equipment continues to be such a very lucrative business that companies deliberately ignore WHO recommendations in order to compete intensely with one another and against breastfeeding.”

Aggressive marketing strategies undermine breastfeeding and mislead those parents and carers who do use formula. Baby Milk Action has exposed how in the UK companies fail to warn parents that powdered formula is not sterile or to give clear instructions on how to reduce the risks of possible contamination with bacteria.

Evidence for the report was compiled from June 2004 to October 2007 by monitors in 67 countries from all continents. Some 3000 violation reports were recorded and analysed (2).

For further details, images and to obtain the report, see the on-line version of this press release at: http://www.babymilkaction.org/press/press29nov07.html


Notes for editors

(1) The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and 12 subsequent relevant World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions. BTR 2007 was launched at the conclusion of the East Asia and Pacific Training Course on implementing the International Code.

(2) Companies in the report are: Abbott Ross, Bayer, Danone, Friesland, Gerber, Heinz, Hipp, Humana, Mead Johnson, Nestle, Numico, Wyeth and 12 feeding bottle and teat manufacturers.

(3) “stomach share”…NUMICO estimates that only 30% of all food consumed in the first 3 years of life is commercially manufactured. The company has a strategy to capture a larger share of the baby’s stomach worldwide

(4) “Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules 2007” was published by ICDC, the International Code Documentation Centre, an IBFAN office which specializes in Code implementation. Soft copies of the report are available on the IBFAN website. Hard copies will be released in December.