Themes in the year: Health claims and contamination

The latest strategies used by baby food companies were exposed in the Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules 2004 monitoring report which we launched with colleagues in the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) in May at the House of Commons.

The results, gathered in 69 countries, demonstrate continued disrespect for the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent, relevant Resolutions of the World Health Assembly. Nestlé was again found to be the worst of the companies, although we have largely stopped it from labelling complementary foods for use from too early an age.

The monitoring shows how companies increasingly idealise their products with health and nutrition claims, especially for ‘optional ingredients’ such as Long Chain fatty acids (LCPs), and Pre- and Pro-biotics. Nestlé’s is using hypo-allergenic claims to promote its formula to health workers in the UK despite legal action in the United States which ruled the name as misleading. This followed several cases of anaphylactic shock in allergic infants fed the milk. The issue of health claims, along with continued concerns about contamination of powdered infant formula by pathogens, were central to discussions at Codex Alimentarius, the EU Commission and the World Health Assembly.

Thirteen years after the adoption of the EU Directive on infant formula, the European Commission issued very weak proposals for a redrafted Directive which allow several new claims. The EU Commission position, which so favours industry, undermines the efforts of many countries inside and outside the EU to protect breastfeeding. The tough draft WHA Resolution, proposed by 6 countries in May was delayed by a year, following pressure by the USA, Canada, Germany, Japan and Australia and Russia. Palau, a sponsor of the Resolution cautioned: “Justice delayed is justice denied.”

Meanwhile, concern continues to grow over Enterbacter Sakazakii contamination of powdered infant formula. Baby Milk Action and our IBFAN partners are calling for levels of contamination to be reduced and for clear warnings on labels and better preparation instructions. The baby food industry, anxious to protect the idealised image of their products, opposes the moves.

The UK Department of Health press release during National Breastfeeding Week entitled: “Myths stop women giving babies the best start in life”, reported that: “Over a third (34%) of women believe that modern infant formula milks are very similar or the same as breastmilk.” The monitoring report we produced on behalf of the Baby Feeding Law Group demonstrates how companies have promoted this myth. The report is being distributed widely as part of our campaign to strengthen UK law and to empower people to report and stop malpractice.
2003 BABY MILK ACTION 2004

**Raising Awareness**

- Members and supporters were essential in raising awareness of the many issues that we tackle. The Boycott of Nestlé, the company responsible for more aggressive baby food promotion than any other, continued to bring public attention to the global concerns. Nestlé lost debates with Baby Milk Action at Nottingham, Reading and Sheffield Universities.

- Area contacts and staff held stalls and workshops at festivals and health professional, trade union and political conferences. The London Group organized the annual demonstration at Nestlé HQ in May. The Reading and Berkshire group organized our stall at the W O M A D festival in July. We joined the Blue trust for the annual corporate-free Tap Water Awards and a demonstration at Nestlé's Perrier Comedy Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August.

- Demonstrations were held at several training days on infant nutrition organised by SMA to highlight the company's criminal conviction for illegal formula advertising in the UK and marketing malpractice worldwide.

- Conferences organised by the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers, Scottish NHS Boards and Centre for International Child Health included presentations on the marketing requirements by Baby Milk Action.

- We were invited to speak at a conference organised by leading environment and human rights NGOs G N G O s in N estlé's home city of Vevey, Switzerland in June. The conference exposed Nestlé malpractice and endorsed a letter calling for Nestlé to be excluded from the United Nations Global Compact.

**IBFAN N**

- IBFAN (the International Baby Food Action Network) celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 2004. We are the UK member of this network, which was formed by 6 groups. There are now more than 200 groups in over 100 countries.

- In December we gave a presentation at the Asia Pacific Conference, organised by the IBFAN group, the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India. Key Policy makers joined over 500 participants from 38 countries and from nearly every state of India. We also attended the Regional Colloquium on HIV and infant feeding.

- Within IBFAN we have responsibility for company campaigns and share responsibility for Code Advocacy in Europe. We maintain the multi-lingual IBFAN website.

**Monitoring and Reporting**

- We continued to produce the Campaign for Ethical Marketing action sheets, targeting the violations of all companies, and assisting supporters to write letters.

- We coordinated the launch of IBFAN’s global monitoring report, Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules 2004, at the House of Commons in May, linked to an Early Day M otion tabled by Lynne Jones MP calling for action to end malpractice, which gained wide support. We were joined by IBFAN experts from around the world (right). A film of the launch is available on DVD and video.

- As part of UK monitoring facilitated by the King’s Fund, we produced a look W hat They’re Doing in the UK monitoring report. We then worked with the N ational Childbirth Trust to produce 1,000 copies.

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**Code Advocacy**

- We joined our IBFAN partners at the W H O Executive Board meeting in January and the W orld Health Assembly in May where a strong draft Resolution calling for no health claims on infant foods, controls on the sponsorship of health workers and warnings on powdered infant formula labels about contamination, was tabled by 6 small countries. Despite the strong support for the Resolution, a few countries successfully called for the matter to be delayed until 2005. We also worked on W H O's Global Strategy on Diet and Physical Activity which was eventually passed. Although fierce lobbying by the sugar industry substantially weakened the text, our advocacy helped to ensure breastfeeding was included. Before the W H O meetings we organised briefing sessions with health and development NGOs and the UK Government.

- In March we organised a training day on the Code for policy makers from the UK Food Standards Agency and the Departments of Health and International Development.

**Networking**

- We continued as the Secretariat of the Baby Feeding Law Group (UK) which has 16 member organisations, including the Royal College of Midwives, the Health Visitors Association and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. The group campaigns to strengthen UK legislation in line with the International Code and Resolutions.

- As the Coordinator of the International Nestlé Boycott, we attended the Nestlé AGM in Switzerland in April, calling on Nestlé to put warnings on the labels of its infant formula.

- We are members of NGO networks such as Sustain, the UK Consortium on AIDS and the UK Food Group and work with trade unions such as UNISON.

**Publishing and Marketing**

- We produced one issue of the Update newsletter, along with several briefing and policy papers.

- Sure Start child-support centres are finding our breastfeeding promotion materials (such as our breastfeeding calendar) of great use, which helps to keep our merchandise sales up.

- Visitors to the Baby Milk Action website access over 43,000 pages every month, many downloading leaflets, posters and briefing papers for their campaigning work. A ‘broadcasts’ section contains film clips, such as the W O M A D theatre piece.