

# Infant formula ads take economic toll

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feeding, despite its advantages, have been similar wherever it has occurred: health professionals who have been inadequately trained in breast-feeding, practices in hospital maternity units, an increase in the number of women working away from home, and aggressive advertising of infant formula.

## PROMOTING BREAST-FEEDING

Programs to promote breast-feeding, therefore, must deal with these causes of its decline. Mothers must be given the confidence necessary for successful breast-feeding as well as the opportunities for frequent nursing that will stimulate their production of milk.

Information and education for the general public, schoolchildren, and especially parents should have government support. Increased attention must be given to breast-feeding in the curricula of health personnel, especially pediatricians, obstetricians and maternity unit nurses. Fortunately, this is slowly occurring as new scientific information and textbooks become available.

Current practices in maternity units also need scrutiny. The practice of separating mother and baby is unnatural and would not be tolerated in any other species. Hospital regimens could be readjusted to increase breast-feeding at no cost whatsoever.

The practice of hospital personnel giving out samples of formula to mothers departing the hospital is particularly likely to sabotage breast-feeding by undermining the mother's confidence and by making free formula temporarily available.

The problems posed by new mothers working outside the home are often serious. In Third World countries, the mother's entire salary is seldom enough to buy adequate formula — and it rarely goes exclusively to this purpose.

In an effort to meet the problem of working mothers, some countries have mandated up to 12 weeks of maternity leave. Also, in some countries, factories employing 15 or more women must provide an area where lactating mothers can take two "nursing breaks" daily.

Under the circumstances in most developing countries, when mothers leave their babies to be bottle-fed by older children or other helpers, the situation can be extremely hazardous; problems of contamination and overdilution are made worse by the uncertainty of the baby's being adequately fed in the mother's absence.

## ADVERTISING INFANT FORMULA

The greatest controversy surrounds measures to deal with the aggressive marketing tactics of infant formula companies. Critics have argued that it is unethical to promote unaffordable products in countries with poor hygiene, where the inevitable result is overdiluted and contaminated feedings and a high risk of marasmus-diarrhea and death.

The formula companies have responded that their marketing is aimed at the well-to-do and at women who must work and those whose milk is insufficient. But in fact, advertising through mass media, such as radio, is not selective in its audience.

Concerned groups in the United States have mobilized public opinion, and their efforts have resulted in some consumers boycotting Nestle, a major manufacturer and promoter of infant formula, and prompted Senate hearings in May 1975.

A few months later, a meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that WHO and UNICEF prepare a Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes that would serve as a guideline to governments wishing to prevent the unethical marketing of formulas.

A code seemingly acceptable to the infant food industry was finally drafted after over a year of negotiations. Among other recommendations, it called for banning direct advertising of infant formula to populations where it could not be used adequately, and for eliminating the distribution of free samples to new mothers. But at the last moment, the infant food companies changed their position and opposed the code.

When the World Health Assembly voted on the code in May 1981, the United States cast the sole negative vote.

That this was contrary to expert health opinion in the U.S. government is indicated by the resignation of two top officials in the Agency for International Development.

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