

# Editorial

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## Breast-Feeding and Big Business- Beware of Entrapment

There is little doubt about the benefits of breastfeeding for both the baby and the mother. Among the many advantages include the composition of the breast milk that is perfectly designed for optimal growth and development of the baby by providing the required nutrition. Breast-feeding protects the baby in the short-term from infections, gastrointestinal diseases, cot deaths (Sudden Infant Death syndrome) and asthma. It also has very significant long-term benefits like lowering the risk of obesity, hyperlipidemia and cardiovascular disease. Some studies have also shown better cognitive development in breastfed babies. Several health benefits for the mother including reduced risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer and cardiovascular diseases has been proven. The act of breast-feeding itself builds a strong emotional bond between the mother and baby. It is recommended as the only form of nutrition for the first 6 months for healthy full-term babies.

Despite these irrefutable facts, only about 40% of children under 6 months of age are exclusively breastfed worldwide and approximately only half of these children continue with breastfeeding for 2 years as recommended by WHO. Commonly mentioned barriers to breast-feeding include the need to work, inconvenience, problems with milk supply, poor public acceptance and lack of time. Another crucial barrier that is undetected is the robust and aggressive promotion of breast milk substitutes by big businesses.

Almost four decades ago, WHO introduced a code of conduct for all countries to eliminate inappropriate promotion of breast-milk substitutes and complementary foods for infants and young children. It clearly mandates the countries to strengthen their legal and regulatory frameworks, specifically addressing all forms of promotion to the general public and in health-care facilities. The countries were required to enact legislation to enable authorized bodies to identify violators and impose penalties. The governments were to strictly enforce a ban on promotion of complementary foods for infants under 6 months of age.

Unfortunately few countries have appropriate and strict measures in place to ensure full implementation.

According to the WHO 2018 report, 134 out of 194 countries had laws in their legislature conforming to this but to varying degrees. Only a third of them have a ban on promotion of complementary foods for infants under 6 months of age. A recent review of legal measures undertaken for 12 countries resulted in downgrading of 11 and only one showing an improvement

WHO recommendation clearly states that “Legislators and policy-makers must recognize their obligations, under both international human rights law and national Code-related or other relevant laws, to promote and protect breastfeeding, and to eliminate inappropriate marketing practices. “

What is the cause for this lackadaisical approach from governments to this serious health issue? A recent event in the UN highlighted the high stakes and brinkmanship involved among super powers and smaller nations in this very major issues which may be a key impediment for stringent enforcement of legislature.

United Nations affiliated World Health Assembly introduced a resolution to encourage breast-feeding at its meeting in May 2018 held in Geneva and expected it to be approved without difficulty. Their resolution was based on several decades of research and it simply stated that ‘mother’s milk is healthiest for children and countries should strive to limit the inaccurate or misleading marketing of breast milk substitutes’.

The United States delegation of all countries at the behest of big companies requested the proposer of the resolution to remove the phases that required governments to “protect, promote and support breast-feeding” and another that called on policymakers to restrict the promotion of food products that has proven to have undesirable effects on young children. There was obvious refusal from the majority and this lead the US delegation

threatening vulnerable countries with harsh trade restrictions and withdrawal of vital economic and military aid. One such country was Ecuador, which quickly consented to the revised resolution. Most of the poor nations from Africa and Latin America backed off due to worries of reprisal.

The policy director of the British advocacy group Baby Milk Action, a veteran of almost 40 years attending these decision making body meetings was quoted as saying "We were astonished, appalled and also saddened, what happened was tantamount to blackmail, with the U.S. holding the world hostage and trying to overturn nearly 40 years of consensus on the best way to protect infant and young child's health." Similar sentiments were expressed by majority of the delegations but mostly in private due to fear. The United States even threatened to restrict their contribution to the WHO, which amount to about 15 percent of its budget. Fortunately, the Russians stepped in to counter the American move resulting in the resolution being passed.

This is a high stakes game affecting a \$70 billion industry controlled mostly by a few American and European companies. Recent data reveal their sales declining in affluent countries due to resurgence in breast-feeding. US government is trying to assist these companies to boost sales in developing nations in an effort to offset their losses in their own nation. Company profits matter more than innocent lives especially under the new US administration.

This incident illustrates the extent to which big businesses in cohort with their governments influence global policy-making institutions. Some nations may not have the ability nor the strength to resist such manoeuvres and succumb to this form of coercion.

It is imperative from the health professional's perspective to counter these measures. Well-respected and competent members should be representatives of national policy-making institutions. Medical professional associations should ensure proper implementation of international accepted codes and policies. Modern era of unfettered access to the public by companies utilizing a variety of advertising tools at their disposal provide opportunities for abuse.

Professionals and their organizations must be wary of sponsorship of events and trips by companies with dubious motives. The developed world too is facing difficulties controlling this menace. A 2017 report from UK revealed that the amount of cash and hospitality given by pharmaceutical companies to doctors is more than GBP 116 million a year despite a drive to make the practice more transparent. Even professional bodies like the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) of UK had to defend itself following their decision to accept funding from manufacturers of breast milk substitutes.

Our nations should take note of these developing trends and take appropriate measures to minimize the impact on our vulnerable population. It is time to introduce strict regulatory measures to curb the influence of these mega-companies on health professionals.

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