

NUTRICIA Breaks Promises!

Nutricia goes for “gold” in China despite the recent infant deaths scandal and despite its earlier promises. In April 2004, 13 infants died in China’s Anhui Province from being fed on “fake” formula. UNICEF has linked this tragedy to relentless commercial promotion of breastmilk substitutes; the clever kind of practices introduced into China by international baby food companies like Nestlé and Nutricia.

Nutricia had said it would re-evaluate its publicity campaign and that it would not violate the Code. We now know it has broken that promise since we have received proof that the Dutch baby food company has been promoting its infant formula “Kissing my Baby 1” by using a popular CD with children’s songs as an incentive.

Back in February 2004, ICDC learnt that Nutricia had at least 50,000 CDs (possibly 100,000) in stock for a new promotional campaign in China. The campaign was to begin in March. ICDC’s “Nutricia Alert”, dated 27th February, warned the company that its publicity campaign was against the Chinese law as well as against the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Both

the Code and the Chinese Rules prohibit gifts to mothers as these undermine breastfeeding.

Nutricia (via NUMICO, its parent organisation) responded to ICDC’s Alert on March 1st by stating that there was a “misunderstanding”, that the promotion would only cover “products outside the range of breastmilk substitutes” and that “in no country would NUMICO ever make advertising or promotion for starter infant formula intended for babies younger than 6 months”.

But in June 2004, a mother in China was given the CD in a supermarket when she bought a tin of NUMICO’s “Kissing my Baby 1”, the infant formula marketed for babies from 0-6 months. It was a clear incentive to buy a Nutricia breastmilk substitute.

Another mother in Beijing, whose baby was just three months old, had heard about the nice songs Nutricia was giving away and phoned the company’s hotline. Within a week she received the CD.

The songs are popular Dutch children’s tunes translated into Chinese. With these songs “we have gold in our hands” said the Nutricia China Director

Front cover of the CD given to Chinese mothers in June 2004

The image shows the front cover of a CD titled "亲亲宝贝合唱团" (Kissing my Baby choir). The cover features a blue background with a photo of a woman and a man, and several circular portraits of children. Text on the cover includes "NUTRICIA 纽迪希亚 荣誉推介", "Featuring 旅荷歌唱家 杨丽敏女士 和 荷兰音乐家 通尼艾克 (Limin Yang and Tonny Eyk)", "VOLUME 1 非賣品", and "荷兰经典童谣 - 音乐启发宝宝智慧 Smart songs for the whole family". A red arrow points from a yellow box labeled "“Kissing my Baby” choir" to the title. Another red arrow points from a yellow box labeled "In June a mother bought this tin of “Kissing my Baby 1” and received the CD as a gift." to a tin of Nutricia "亲亲宝贝" (Kissing my Baby 1) formula. A third red arrow points from a yellow box labeled "Kissing my Baby 3 packshot" to a smaller tin of the same formula. A fourth red arrow points from a yellow box labeled "Dutch nursery rhymes – Music inspires babies’ intelligence" to the bottom of the CD cover.

in February on a Dutch TV news programme. As he spoke, he was filmed arranging the CD against a display of 2 sets of formula: *Kissing my Baby 1, 2 & 3* and *Cow & Gate 1, 2 & 3*. Promotional posters were part of the display – Nutricia China seemed all set to harvest “gold” by increased sales.

IBFAN’S alert spoilt the scheme. At least the beginning of it. Hundreds of emails told NUMICO that consumers were watching. Newspapers in Holland picked up on the story: “Such a terrible set back, now there is confusion”, said the Nutricia China Director in an interview on March 4th, “we were not going to use the CD for selling our first phase infant formula...”

But in June he was caught doing precisely that. The CD cover itself advertises the *Kissing my Baby* brand, even the choir is called ‘Kissing my Baby’. The cover shows ‘phase 3’ formula, but this looks exactly like 1 and 2 and serves to promote them all. The CD was a gift to a mother whose baby was less than 6 months old and who had purchased the ‘phase 1’ formula. The CD cover also blatantly promotes Nutricia as a company which has been making babies smarter for a hundred years, no less. This is important in China as it gives the credibility of tradition. Listening to the songs is said to relax babies and make them more intelligent, another manipulation of Chinese values.

Surely the Alert made Nutricia more careful but it also knew that monitoring in China is difficult – it is not a country with much consumer awareness or with NGOs – precisely why it was such a ‘golden’ opportunity for Nutricia, too good a campaign to pass up. Perhaps it took a gamble, not expecting IBFAN to catch it red-handedly? The reports by the two mothers

are likely to be the tip of iceberg. Only Nutricia knows how many of the 50,000 CDs were distributed. Maybe all of them? Maybe they had 100,000 as one newspaper reported. This CD is Volume 1. Has Nutricia already ordered more CD’s?

Meanwhile, China struggles to come to grips with the “big headed baby” tragedy. The fake formula not only killed 13 infants, aged between 4 and 6 months, but it caused at least 170 others to suffer from the big head disease, so-called because the children’s heads grew abnormally large while the rest of their bodies became just skin and bones. The survivors may be stunted for life. At least 45 local companies in 10 provinces were found to have marketed substandard milk powder.

“The deaths of the babies (in Fuyang, Anhui) might have been avoided if they were breastfed,” Professor Dai Yaohua of the WHO Collaborative Centre told *China Daily* on May 5th. Breastfeeding rates, however, have declined enormously over the last six years, especially in the rural areas. Less than 58 % of infants born in 2000 in Anhui Province were breastfed. One of the reasons for that sharp decline is the publicity for ‘modern’ western baby milks. Local companies, some with fake milk powder, ride the wave of the newly created markets. The Chinese government is urged to enforce its law by taking action against random promotion of breastmilk substitutes.

“Using popular Dutch children’s songs to increase sales in China may make good business sense”, says Annelies Allain, coordinator of ICDC, “but the company has disgraced Holland. Nutricia knows its promotion competes with breastfeeding — it has broken the Chinese law, it has broken the Code and it has broken its promises. Shame on Nutricia”.

Intro to the CD on back cover:

“Every song is easy and happy, which will relax mother and baby and also build character. More importantly, mother and baby may dance to the music which promotes your baby’s intelligence.”

Slogan repeated 5 times on the CD cover:

“For over 100 years, Nutricia has been committed to making babies smarter”.

On back cover of CD, a nationwide free hotline:



Inside cover of CD

