



April 17,2010

Saudi Pediatric Association
Subject: Medical Conflict of Interest

Dear Sirs:

A very serious issue arises from an on- going acceptance of sponsorship funds from formula manufacturers. This practice creates a biased atmosphere where families are unable to make informed healthy choices. Acceptance of funds and sponsorship by noted organizations fosters the use of the health care system as a promotional channel and places health care workers in situations of conflict of interest.

Breastfed babies are protected from various ailments including diarrhea, respiratory infections, otitis media, asthma and many others. Additionally, WHO/UNICEF estimates annual deaths of 1.5 million infants worldwide because they are not breastfed. The infants in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are not immune to the side effects of bottle-feeding and our breastfeeding rates are declining.

The World Health Organization (WHO) guides the world in this regard with a recommendation not to collaborate with manufacturers and distributors of infant formulas. The 1996 World Health Assembly recognized that sponsorship and other financial support from the baby food industry can create conflict of interest among medical professionals. In fact sponsorship will always explicitly or implicitly require something in return.

The Baby Food industry always tries to undermine breastfeeding in order to obtain commercial benefit at the cost of child health. By sponsoring organizations, websites as well as events like Pediatric conferences, the national Polio Campaign and funds for hospitals it finds the golden opportunity to influence medical professionals by distributing literature with unjustified and unscientific health claims. Consequently participants and mothers go home with misleading messages detrimental to breastfeeding and child health/ nutrition in general.

There is a great deal of literature in medical journals and dialogue amongst health authorities in regard to the topic of sponsorships and the creation of conflict of interest amongst members of the medical profession. The evidence always shows that ultimately it affects patient care, especially child health.

Companies use medical events as tools to promote their products. The baby food industry frequently sponsors medical scientific meetings and educational events. They pay for entertainment during the events and set up promotional booths where product displays are exhibited. Participants receive promotional materials and “free give-a-ways”. The majority of health professionals are not aware of the subtleties of these

gifts and sponsorship, but in fact gifts and sponsorships create an unconscious bias that they cannot control. Brand awareness is built.

In 1987, an international group of doctors developed the 'Doctors Declaration for Breastfeeding' which states that signatories "under all ordinary circumstances will not accept personal funding from an infant food company for purposes such as travel, research or equipment".

Realizing the severity of the problem, many Governmental authorities including A Shoura in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia developed legislation to control the baby food industry through various versions of the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Here in the Kingdom, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd signed the Saudi version into law in September of 2004. (May he rest in peace.)

In view of the above, we ask you to appreciate the seriousness of the issue. Please reconsider allowing companies like Bebelac, Wyeth, Nestle and Abbott the strong position of sponsorship /event sponsor, distribution of "breastfeeding material and false educators". Our situation is just as delicate and desperate as it is in most other places in the world, for we represent the heart of the Muslim world.

Malnutrition and high mortality affect Muslim children most according to a report released by UNICEF in Sept. 2005. Islamic States account for the worlds' highest child mortality rates, where 60 percent of children die from disease and malnutrition before their first birthday. Over 4.3 million Muslim children worldwide under the age of five die every year and over one third suffer from persistent malnutrition (UNICEF).

Our children are dying or live out their lives suffering unnecessary health problems like Diabetes, Obesity and Hypertension in direct relation to the decline in breastfeeding, which could so easily provide food and good health security for at least the first two years of their lives. By supporting, protecting and promoting breastfeeding each Saudi family can better afford to secure food for their infants and the rest of their family, rather than spending perhaps as much as half of their income for formula plus the unnecessary cost of treating preventable illnesses.

Please reconsider your sponsors and join us in an effort to protect the future health and well being of the Saudi children and the society as a whole.

Respectfully,

IBFAN Arab World Co-ordination