



THE FEDERATION OF MEDICAL SOCIETIES OF HONG KONG

香 港 醫 學 組 織 聯 會

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POSITION STATEMENT

BY THE FEDERATION OF MEDICAL SOCIETIES OF HONG KONG

Re : Consultation on "Hong Kong Code of Marketing and Quality of Formula Milk and Related Products, and Food Products for Infants and Young Children"

The World Health Organization published the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in 1981 which has been widely adopted internationally. The Federation is fully in support of the ideas and practices of the Code.

Breast milk is the ideal food for newborns and infants. It gives infants all the nutrients they need for healthy development. It is safe and contains antibodies that help protect infants from common childhood illnesses - such as diarrhoea and pneumonia, the two primary causes of child mortality worldwide. (1) Breast milk is readily available and affordable, which helps to ensure that infants get adequate sustenance. Breast feeding reduces the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. (2)

Beyond the immediate benefits for children, breastfeeding contributes to a lifetime of good health. Adults who were breastfed as babies often have lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, as well as lower rates of overweight, obesity and type-2 diabetes. There is evidence that people who were breastfed perform better in intelligence tests. (3)

Breastfeeding also benefits mothers. The practice when done exclusively is associated with a natural (though not fail-safe) method of birth control (98% of protection in the first 6 months after birth). It reduces risks of breast and ovarian cancer later in life, helps women return to their pre-pregnancy weight faster, and lowers rates of obesity. (4)

Breastfeeding not only benefits the babies and mothers individually. Researches have confirmed this is also extremely good for mother-child, paternal and familial bonding and mental health development of all. (5)

Support for mothers is essential. Breastfeeding has to be learned and many women encounter difficulties at the beginning. Nipple pain, and fear that there is not enough milk to sustain the baby are common. Health facilities that support breastfeeding - by making trained breastfeeding counsellors

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available to new mothers - encourage higher rates of the practice. To provide this support and improve care for mothers and newborns, there are now more than 20,000 "baby-friendly" facilities in 152 countries thanks to a WHO-UNICEF initiative.

Many mothers who return to work abandon breastfeeding partially or completely because they do not have sufficient time, or a place to breastfeed, express and store their milk. Mothers need a safe, clean and private place in or near their work to continue breastfeeding. Enabling conditions at work can help, such as paid maternity leave, part-time work arrangements, on-site crèches, facilities for expressing and storing breast milk, and breastfeeding breaks.

The Federation believes the government can lead by example. Government work places should contain designated rooms for breast milk extraction and storage. Government owned public places should have infant feeding rooms. Other venues like MTR stations, shopping centres should be encouraged to follow suit. Labour ordinances may have to be looked at for possible amendments and improvements in this area as well.

Infant formula does not contain the antibodies found in breast milk. When infant formula is not properly prepared, there are some risks arising from the use of unsafe water and unsterilized equipment or the potential presence of bacteria in powdered formula. Malnutrition can result from over-diluting formula to "stretch" supplies. Further, frequent feedings maintain the breast milk supply. If formula is used but becomes unavailable, a return to breastfeeding may not be an option due to diminished breast milk production. Marketed baby formulas have varied sugar contents where some can be as high as 13.5g per serving, which is equivalent to three and a half teaspoon of sugar per 5 ounces. Baby bottle syndrome is the rapid tooth decay of baby teeth in exposure to liquids containing sugars for long periods of time. Formula feeding increases the chance of children getting cavities. (6)

While there are in fact few medical contraindications to breastfeeding, there are mothers who are unable to do so due to medical or personal reasons. In these situations evidence-based information on breast milk substitutes should be allowed to let mothers make informed choices for their babies. Misleading information in commercial advertisements should be closely scrutinized and discouraged.

On the other hand the government is also responsible for making a safe and steady supply of milk formula a priority for our local children.

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The Federation is in full support of the consultation document. However as it is voluntary in nature, we are concerned that there might not be enough motivation for the manufacturers or retailers to comply with the code. The Federation will continue to promote breast feeding. We will be one of the platforms to advocate this natural, safe and healthy method of infant feeding. Through the contact of the professionals of our member societies and the public we will continue to educate the public about the science and facts of breastfeeding and correct any misleading or utterly incorrect information available in the public domain. We shall continue to do our best to protect the health and wellbeing of mothers and children and the public at large.

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- (4) Stuebe A, Gillman M, Kleinman K, Rifas-Shiman S, Rich-Edwards J (2007). "Duration of lactation and maternal metabolism at 3 years postpartum". Am J Obstet Gynecol 197: S128
- (5) van Willigen J (2002). Applied anthropology: an introduction. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey. ISBN 0-89789-833-8.
- (6) Statement of Early Childhood Caries, American Dental Association (<http://www.ada.org./2057.aspx>)

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APPENDIX

The statement is issued by the Executive Committee of the Federation of Medical Societies of Hong Kong and with the feedback and response from the following member societies duly acknowledged and incorporated.

- 1 Hong Kong Dietitians Association Ltd
- 2 Hong Kong Nutrition Association Limited
- 3 Hong Kong Society of Paediatric Dentistry
- 4 The Hong Kong Paediatric Society
- 5 The Hong Kong Society of Community Medicine
- 6 The Hong Kong Society of Diagnostic Radiologists

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