

To: Panel on Health Services

Supporting Implementation of “Hong Kong Code”

I, as a private doctor, an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant and a mother of 3 breastfed children, would like to fully support the implementation of “Hong Kong Code”.

My above statement is based on the following *evidence-based* facts:

1. First 1000 days’ feeding are the foundation of human lifelong health

What we eat and experience during the first 1000 days are the foundation of human lifelong health. These 1000 days starts from the conception of fetus and continued up to the first 2 years of the child. Recent evidence also showed that taking formula milk with higher protein content during the first year of life increased the risk of obesity at two years old compared to feeding on formula milk with lower protein content or breastfeeding.

2. Breastfeeding is the norm for infant and young child

Baby’s immune system is developmentally immature at birth. It needs at least 2 to 3 years to become relatively mature. The transplacental antibodies gained before birth is finished at around 6 months old after birth. Therefore, 6 months old to 2 years old is the *“window period”* during which infant and young child are vulnerable to infections. Breast milk has various active anti-infective, anti-inflammatory and immune-modulating components while none of these is present in formula milk. In conclusion, breastfeeding is able to supplement, complement and modulating the immune system of infant and young child. In short, human babies and children need breastfeeding. If breastfeeding is the norm, then why do government need to advertise breastfeeding nowadays? Obviously, it’s because the opposing forces are too strong.

3. Formula milk supplementation in calibration period down-regulates breast milk production

Back to physiology of lactation, the first few weeks are the most critical and sensitive period of upregulating milk production. If formula milk is added in this calibration period, mother’s confidence in breastfeeding and her milk production would be down-regulated rapidly. In reality, the rate of supplementation in early

weeks is high. Only about 30% of mothers keep exclusive breastfeeding at 1 month old.

4. Advertising formula milk leads the trend of infant feeding preference

In the year of 80s, formula milk companies started to promote their products. The result was more parents choosing formula milk. Since the end of 90s to year 2000, government has been promoting breastfeeding more actively than before. In year 2001, 1.3 billion dollars were invested in advertising formula milk. As more and more parents choose breastfeeding, formula milk companies reacted to advertise more and more. And the types of products are also increased, e.g. milk for pregnant women. Not surprisingly, they invested 29 billion dollars in 2015 which was 21 times more than that 15 years ago. Obviously, this situation follows the rule of *“Action and Reaction”*.

A randomized controlled trial done in America in year 2000 also showed that pregnant women who received formula milk promotion materials, compared with those received only breastfeeding information during their first prenatal visit, were more likely to stop breastfeeding in the first two weeks.

Many parents of children above 1 year of age, believe that “milk should still be the major part of a child’s diet”. They continue to spend money in purchasing follow-up formula milk for their toddlers or even primary school children. Few parents know that child older than 1 year old is able to drink cow’s milk because the digestive system is mature enough to tolerate it.

5. Advertising formula milk bypass health worker’s advice, but infant feeding is a health issue

Infant feeding is a matter of “life and death” public health issue as shown by tremendous medical evidences. Hence, health workers should supervise or give advice to parents if their babies need breast milk substitutes for certain medical reasons. Advertising formula milk disseminate information directly to parents and so bypassing the supervision of health worker. The discussion of “Hong Kong Code” is not at the same level of advertising other products such as shampoo, beauty products, loan services etc. It is a public health issue at the same level as the anti-smoking campaign.

6. Public may not have adequate medical knowledge to judge truefulness of formula milk health claims

Formula milk companies have advertised a number of health claims which are lack of medical evidence, e.g. DHA additive improves brain development. Formula milk companies argue that parents have adequate wisdom to differentiate their messages. Do all laymen have adequate medical knowledge to differentiate health claims' truthfulness? If majority believe these messages are true, then it will become the "norm". Should it be the responsibility of formula milk companies to ensure evidence-based health claims before advertising them?

7. Advertising follow-up formula is perceived as advertising infant formula

Although formula milk companies comply the rule that infant formula is not advertised, follow-up formula is produced and advertised more aggressively. Surveys showed that majority could not distinguish between infant formula and follow-up formula in the advertisement because the designs are nearly the same.

In sum, formula milk supplementation in early weeks down-regulates mother's milk production, jeopardizes successful breastfeeding and thus increases health risk. Those who suggest that direct advertising has no negative effect on breastfeeding should be asked to demonstrate that such advertising fails to influence a mother's decision upon infant feeding.

Regards,

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