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Subject: Written submission 4D0DC89

To: Ms Maggie Chiu
Panel on Health Services

Re: HK Code of marketing of formula milk & related products, & food products for infants & young children
(special meeting on 10/4/2017)

Dear Maggie,

I am an obstetrician working in public sector for more than 25 years. I really want to come on 10 Apr to support the HK code but unfortunately I cannot come because of clinical duties in the hospital.

As a result I would like to send my personal view as follows:

Protecting breastfeeding and optimal young child feeding practices from undue commercial influence is a vitally important public health issue. Considerable evidence has shown that marketing of breastmilk substitutes undermines breastfeeding.

Yet, Hong Kong is notorious for its rampant marketing of formula milk, in particular, follow-up formula despite a lack of scientific evidence for its use. Expectant parents and new parents are flooded by unsolicited commercial promotional messages in advertisements, direct and indirect contacts via mothers' clubs and all sorts of marketing tactics. Every year, local companies spend billions of dollars on advertising formula milk marketed for infants and young children in Hong Kong, which subject promotion of breastfeeding and optimal feeding practices to an uneven level playing field. Public funds should not be used to compete with such commercial products, and the latter should be regulated to safeguard child public health.

The proposed HK Code has undergone rounds of consultation with different stakeholders during the drafting period and public consultation exercise, and thereafter, a long process of amendments in response to the latest overseas guidelines and local regulations. I appreciate the Administration's effort in finalising the HK Code, that is grounded in scientific evidence of health protection and has drawn on international best practice. Nevertheless, its promulgation and implementation is long overdue.

I should like to offer the following for your kind consideration:-

1.The scope of the HK Code covering formula milk and pre-packaged food for children under 36 months of age must be maintained [擇善固執], as aligned to the recommendation of the 2016 WHO's guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children. Otherwise, loopholes concerning the period between (6 or) 12 and 36 months are left to be exploited to the ongoing detriment of infant and toddler health.

2.Parents' informed decision on infant feeding should be based on unbiased evidence-based scientific information and supported by health professionals, rather than commercial promotional activities. HK Code protects infant feeding practices from undue commercial influence, i.e. protecting those opt for breastfeeding as well as formula milk feeding.

3.The voluntary HK Code is considered the first important step towards protecting healthy infant and young child feeding practices. I would strongly disagree with any suggestion to delay the implementation of the Code, instead awaiting legislation.

4.The Code is a necessary although insufficient measure. It has to be complemented by other on-going evidence-based initiatives, including but not limited to implementation of baby friendly initiative, promotion of breastfeeding friendly workplaces, protection of women's right to breastfeed in public, strengthening public education and the extension of maternity leave.

Regards,

Dr WC Leung

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