AIMS For a better birth...

Funding from formula

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Patti Rundell of Baby Milk Action is outraged and AIMS asks you to support the campaign

Following the announcement of the decision of the Council of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to accept funding from manufacturers of breastmilk substitutes, the Lancet has published a strong comment from Dr Anthony Costello and colleagues at the World Health Organisation.

The comment is unequivocal, stating that; '*This decision raises serious concerns about the college's impartiality and sets a harmful precedent for other health professional organisations.*'

The statement concludes; '*The RCPCH has forfeited an opportunity to be a standard bearer and champion for children and young people globally and to exemplify implementation of the WHO International Code and Guidance. Instead, RCPCH is sending a strong message to its members and others worldwide that benefitting from funding from BMS manufacturers is acceptable.*'

What prompted this condemnation?

At its Annual Conference in April 2016, RCPCH members passed a motion that the College should '*decline any commercial transactions or any other kind of funding or support from all companies that market products within the scope of the World Health Organisation (WHO) code on the marketing of breast milk substitutes.*'

The Council's decision to ignore this and instead conduct a postal vote, that resulted in its new policy accepting such funding has divided RCPCH members, with many worried that corporate funding risks damaging the integrity, reputation and ability of the RCPCH and its members to be an independent advisor to parents.

Parents are targeted with misleading health and nutrition claims and aggressive marketing and, as a result, baby foods and formulas are now the fastest growing food sector with global sales predicted to rise to US$ 70.6 billion by 2019.

Health experts recognise that poor diet is now the biggest underlying cause of ill health and disease globally - far bigger than tobacco, alcohol and lack of physical activity, and early child feeding is a critically important factor. The sweetened and flavoured products being so aggressively promoted to parents, not only undermine breastfeeding but also affect children's acceptance of healthy, unprocessed family foods. In this context parents need independent and sound scientific advice from health professionals to see through the false messages. This is not a time for professional bodies to increase

dependency on profit-driven corporations.

The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, and World Health Assembly Resolutions (The Code) were adopted to protect all children – those who are breastfed and those who are not. In the human rights context the Code and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) place no obligation on women – who will always remain fully sovereign over their own bodies.

It's a favourite corporate tactic to personalise these issues – with the implication that the blame should be placed on individuals (in this case parents) for making the wrong 'choice'. They know that such thinking diverts attention from badly needed weak or non-existent regulations – and that it also fuels the anger parents rightly feel when they are misled, let down and unsupported. So of course, pressure must be brought on corporations to respect child rights and end harmful marketing.

Thanks to the WHO staff for recognising this and highlighting the need for a radical rethink of the professional bodies' funding policies everywhere. It is so urgently needed.

Full information on the issue is available from Baby Milk Action at www.babymilkaction.org/archives/11135.

AIMS Comment

Many paediatricians including Neena Modi, President of the RCPCH, don't see a problem in accepting funds from manufactures of breastmilk substitutes (BMS) towards their research. They believe, I'm sure genuinely, that they will not be influenced in any way by this. Similarly we, as mothers, tend to see our decision over feeding our babies as individual ones, maybe influenced by our families and surroundings but as Gabrielle Palmer shows so eloquently in her book, Why the Politics of Breastfeeding Matter, (see book review on page 27) when governments apply the Code on Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes with vigour breast feeding rates go up dramatically. We cannot insulate ourselves from powerful commercial interests, much as we might wish we could and so the decision by the RCPCH to overturn its conference decision is an unwise one, risking much damage to its reputation for integrity. We have drafted the open letter below; it is simple because the Royal College will be aware of the evidence for the fact that commercial interests offer funds in the knowledge that they are effective in influencing policy. Letters from parents expressing their dismay may help the members of the college who clearly disagree with this decision to overturn it. So, do write a letter and encourage the President to reconsider.

An open letter to
Neena Modi, President of the RCPCH, 5-11 Theobolds Road, London WC1X9SH.

Dear Neena Modi,

I urge you to reconsider your position on accepting money from companies who stand to gain every time a woman decides not to breast feed her baby. Of course the manufacture of breastmilk substitutes is necessary, but your argument that the college can accept relatively small donations from the large profits made without sacrificing credibility is not convincing. Parents understand that, whatever safeguards you are able to put into place, a conflict of interest becomes inevitable; your reputation and ability to act as independent advisors to mothers on feeding their babies will be damaged.

Yours sincerely