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Baby Milk Action aims to promote good and appropriate infant nutrition and to halt the commercial promotion of bottle feeding.

Report from Baby Milk Action (Ireland) on the Convention of the Rights of the Child

**BABY MILK
ACTION**



This year, Ireland will report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. One of the provisions of the Convention, and one largely overlooked in Ireland, is for all parents to have access to basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, particularly the advantages of breastfeeding (article 24).

Since the National Breastfeeding Policy in 1994, the Irish Government has shown little commitment to implement the policy's recommendations and targets or international instruments to protect, promote and support breastfeeding, such as the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, the Innocenti Declaration and Article 24 of the Convention for the Rights of the Child.

Breastfeeding in Ireland

Ireland continues to have the lowest breastfeeding rates in Europe, with only 32% of mothers initiating breastfeeding, and less than 12% still feeding any breastmilk at all by 3 months. These figures are from 1989 and 1986 respectively, illustrating the lack of even basic breastfeeding information provided by the Government. There are no figures available for exclusive breastfeeding or long duration breastfeeding as these studies have not been carried out. Recent anecdotal evidence would suggest that there has been a small but significant rise in the breastfeeding rates, largely due to efforts from voluntary organisations and health workers on a local basis.

Provision of information

The Department of Health publishes 'The Book of the Child' and 'Food and Babies'. While the content of these publications is accurate and informative on infant feeding, they have both been out of print for long periods at a time. The Department funds the publication of information by a small number of breastfeeding organisations but does not actually disseminate this information. None of the NGO publications are available from the Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health.

Funding of Voluntary Organisations

The Health Promotion Unit provides funding to two national mother support groups. However, funding is on an *ad hoc* basis and there is no long-term or core funding. The funding is usually given for specified projects such as posters or leaflets, but never for running costs. Distribution is not funded and as mentioned previously, these materials will not be stocked or distributed by the Health Promotion Unit.

Implementation of the International Code

Ireland has transposed the European directives on the marketing of infant and follow-on formula. Uniquely in Europe, the Irish legislation contains no endorsement or reference to the International Code. The Irish law is much weaker than the Code, and fails to state that the Government has responsibility to provide information. It is also difficult to report violations of the law because firstly, it has never been publicised, so few people are aware of its existence.

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BMA(Iri) CRC Report/October 1997/page 1

Baby Milk Action is a member of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), a network of citizens' groups working in over 70 countries worldwide.

Secondly because no-one, not even the Department of Health, has a clear idea of the reporting procedure. For these reasons, there has never been a reported violation of the law and the Government assumes this to mean that there are no violations and therefore no action need be taken.

As previously outlined, there is a serious lack of independent and accurate information about infant feeding. The formula companies active in the Irish market are more than willing to fill this gap. Promotion of artificial feeding is rife, particularly through the health care system. In the absence of funding from the Government, health workers look to formula companies for sponsorship of information, meetings, study days and equipment. Many trainee health workers are given lectures on infant nutrition by company representatives.

The companies now provide information about every aspect of infant feeding as well as pregnancy and childcare information. Information materials include freephone numbers inviting mothers to contact these companies, rather than health professionals, for advice on infant feeding. It has been estimated that 80% of the infant feeding information pregnant women and new mothers receive is from companies with a commercial interest in artificial feeding. In a recent study, it was found that in some maternity units, antenatal classes on infant feeding were given by company representatives. In one maternity unit, only one of the information materials provided to mothers was not published by a baby milk company. It was a leaflet about Sore Breasts.

BFHI in Ireland

There are no Baby Friendly Hospitals in Ireland. The Government has yet to appoint a BFHI Co-ordinator or Committee. Some hospitals have been working on the Ten Steps, but have found little Government support for their initiatives.

The formula industry in Ireland

Ireland is a dairy producing country and formula milk is manufactured and exported from factories in Ireland. The formula manufacturers have their own voluntary code of practice. However this code is very weak, applying only to infant formula and allowing solid foods to be marketed from 12 weeks. Its 'breastfeeding is best' statement for information materials refers to adequately breastfed infants of *healthy* mothers and does not permit information which is likely to upset the mother who cannot (or does not) breastfeed.

The Department of Health seems to be happy to allow the industry to regulate itself. In previous Governments, Ministers for Health had formula company factories in their constituencies, and seemed more concerned about Irish jobs and exports than protecting infant health. In one case, the then Minister publicly opened a new formula factory, presented awards for a formula company-sponsored event, but never attended a breastfeeding event or made a public statement in support of breastfeeding for the duration of his term as Minister.

Conclusion

Irish mothers are not being given consistent and accurate information with which to make an informed choice about infant feeding. As a result the majority of Irish babies are never breastfed. With such low breastfeeding rates, the highest attainable level of health is difficult to achieve.

Efforts by the voluntary groups and health care professionals is hampered by the pervasive influence of promotional information from companies with commercial interests in artificial feeding, and a lack of support and funding from the Government. Until there is sufficient action from the Government, this situation will be difficult to reverse.

Baby Milk Action suggests, as a step towards implementation of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that the Government urgently takes action to implement *in full* the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions on infant feeding, as a minimum standard to protect infant health in Ireland.

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