

## **Comments on the draft 'Hong Kong Code of Marketing and Quality of formula milk and related products, and food products for infant and young children' (HK Code)**

I, as a paediatrician practising in the private sector, would like to write in to support the establishment of the Hong Kong Code.

Breast-feeding has always been accepted as the best way of feeding the newborn infant in the first year of life. Moreover, medical evidence is mounting to show that in fact breast-feeding is the single most important known and easy preventative measure against diseases ranging from infections in the newborn period to allergic diseases like eczema and asthma, and most importantly, against obesity, hypertension and cardiovascular disease in the adult. From this point of view, breast-feeding, especially exclusive breastfeeding for the first 4-6 months, is the most powerful preventative measure against the elements of the metabolic syndrome, the most important public health problem in developed societies including Hong Kong. Lastly, breast-feeding also prevents breast cancer in the mother, a rapidly increasing problem in Hong Kong. Needless to say, this is a relatively cheap and cost effective means of prevention with society-wide implications.

On the other hand, the increase of formula feeding in infants has been a major factor in the increase of childhood obesity in Hong Kong and many other countries with a similar situation. The higher protein content of infant formula is a principal reason for the programming of the infant's fat cells, resulting in obesity and development of the metabolic syndrome in adulthood.

However, since the nineteen-seventies, breast-feeding rates have dropped dramatically in Hong Kong. Although in the past decade we are seeing some improvements in the ever-breastfeeding rate on discharge from hospitals, the rates for continuing and exclusive breastfeeding remain appallingly low. I am sure the Government is acutely aware of the situation. Although the cause may be multi-factorial, this is NOT a reason for us to be distracted from the focus of discussion in the present draft HK Code. I am of the opinion that continued marketing practices of the formula companies in the past 2 decades are a MAJOR reason for our society's low acceptance of breast-feeding. The amount of money that the companies inject into their advertising campaigns bears witness to this fact. Pregnant women and potential mothers are brain-washed to choose formula to feed their babies, as I am often asked, in the first place, which formula they should use, not whether they should breastfeed or formula feed. Even for many who want to breastfeed, often it cannot be sustained and many settle for mixed breast and formula feeding, which compromises the benefits of breast milk. Supplementation of breast-feeding with formula also causes progressively lower breast milk production, leading to eventual failure of breast-feeding. It is well known that ill-prepared breast-feeding mothers need the support of everyone around to successfully breastfeed. The present marketing practices in Hong Kong are a major discouragement for these mothers. Moreover, mothers are brainwashed to believe that the formula contains many good things that will make their babies healthier, not knowing that breast milk has not only more of the good things that the formula claims, but a host of immune cells, antibodies, growth factors, enzymes and nutrients that are irreplaceable.

The medical profession at large has also become brainwashed although the profession does not admit it. No doctor will deny the fact that breast is best, but not many will strive to ensure breast-feeding is successful, especially in the private sector. At the same time we are receiving many promotional materials, sponsorships, give-aways and financial support from formula companies.

Such sponsorship has been effective in making us think that formula feeding is comparable to breastfeeding in many ways and weakens the profession's stand on supporting breast-feeding. I personally have been in receipt of such sponsorships and one can find many paediatricians and obstetricians receive the same. The prohibition of such promotional and marketing manoeuvres within the medical profession is the most effective way to change the profession's attitudes and practices.

Therefore in order to increase the sustained exclusive breastfeeding rate for the health of our future generations and the community at large, the Government has an undeniable responsibility to control the present marketing practices of the formula companies. Such control is not new and has been the case in many developed countries. The establishment of this HK Code will be a first step to show the Government's determination to promote better and healthier feeding practices in the community. I support all the proposals in the draft document. Moreover, the situation should be put under close surveillance so that if compliance is unsatisfactory, such recommendations should be legislated.

The issue of breast-feeding is multi-factorial. I am sure the Government understands that apart from the code, there is much room for improvement in other aspects. Therefore, the Government should, as a next step, seriously consider other measures that will promote breast-feeding in the community, including extended postnatal leave for breast-feeding mothers and their husbands, more breast-feeding facilities in the community, and stronger education in the schools.

In the context of health promotion and disease prevention, promotion of breast-feeding is the most important battle the Government should fight to ensure the ultimate health of the community. I hope this is only the beginning of a change in paradigm. Presently we are allocating far too much resource to the treatment of diseases, while overlooking the more important and cost effective aspect of prevention. It is high time that the Government placed more emphasis and resource in disease prevention and health promotion. If the present Government claims to have a more visionary view of the long term welfare of Hong Kong, this is the issue that the Food and Health Bureau should be considering.

Alfred Tam