

Infant Formula Companies, the SIF ECS Code of Ethics, and You By Karen Wong

Scene 1

You are flipping through the newspaper, and decide to sign up for a talk on childbirth, breastfeeding and motherhood. On the form, you are asked to fill up your name, address, age, and ...EDD (Expected Due Date) or DOB (Date of Birth) of your baby.

Scene 2

You worked very hard at pushing out your baby yesterday. You are thankful that the hospital allows you to room-in with him. The breastfeeding advisor just visited you and watched your baby do the right things. Then out of the blue, a nurse comes into your room, puts a bottle of formula into your baby's cot and asks, "Want or not?".

Scene 3

You visit your doctor and as usual, chat with the staff behind the counter. She congratulates you on the birth of your baby and promptly hands over a 500g tin of formula.

These scenes are familiar to all of us. Haven't we at some time or other gone for a talk or sent away a coupon for baby product samples and filled out our baby's EDD or birth date? Haven't we ever got a bottle of formula from the nurse, and just thought she forgot that you were totally breastfeeding? Haven't we seen the doctor's waiting rooms decorated with formula tins and booklets advising on how to breastfeed?

Innocent enough, aren't they? But they are all violating one or more of the items in the Code of Ethics on the Sale of Infant Formula Products in Singapore. Many medical professionals know that the Code of Ethics applies to the conduct of the infant food industry. But, they do not realise that parts of the Code also addresses polyclinics, maternity wards, paediatric clinics and family doctors' practices.

This code was formulated by the Sale of Infant Foods Ethics Committee, Singapore (SIF ECS). The original Committee and Code, formulated in 1979, predates the 1981 WHO International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. In 1995, the Ministry of Health reviewed the membership of SIF ECS, and the present edition is a revised version of the original Code of Ethics.

All firms dealing with infant foods in Singapore have agreed to subscribe to the Code and submit their promotional, educational and product use instructional materials for approval by the Vetting Committee of SIF ECS before distributing them.

The Code aims to protect and promote breastfeeding by providing guidelines on the use of breastmilk substitutes and any food which partially or totally replaces breastmilk - for infants from Birth to 6 months. The Vetting Committee, however, has no executive powers and infant food companies often push the limits of the Code.

YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE! Be aware that under the Code:

- All information on breastfeeding can only be distributed through or conducted by healthcare professionals.
- Infant food companies, or their representatives may not pay for or conduct mothercraft-like services (eg. home care programmes, hotlines, soliciting mothers, baby clubs, newsletters, talks on infant care).
- In hospitals, infant formula cannot be distributed as routine, and discharge packets cannot contain infant foods.
- Product samples of infant food is not allowed.
- Product advertising and promotion of infant food including point-of-sale promotions; baby shows; display of samples, pamphlets and posters at polyclinics, maternity wards, paediatric clinics and family doctors' practices are not allowed.

Any other uses you have tried?

(from "Keeping Abreast" Jan-Mar 1998 issue) © BMSG (Singapore)