

Experts sound alarm on 'exploitative' baby formula industry

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Baby milk formula companies are exploiting parents' emotions and manipulating scientific information and policymakers to generate sales at the expense of the health and rights of families, women, and children,

argue an international team of scientists including experts from The Australian National University (ANU) and Deakin University.

In a special three-paper series published in *The Lancet*, the researchers argue less than half of infants worldwide are being breastfed as recommended by World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, while milk [formula](#) sales are on the rise.

According to the researchers, only about a third of infants in Australia are breastfed as recommended.

The 2023 Lancet Series on Breastfeeding calls for active promotion of breastfeeding, enabling mums, families and [health professionals](#) to make informed decisions around infant feeding that are guided by accurate information and free from industry influence.

The authors are calling for the urgent adoption of an international legal treaty to better regulate formula marketing ploys and protect the health and well-being of mothers and their infants.

Lead author Dr. Phil Baker, from Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), said Australia is one of only a few countries worldwide that has not implemented the WHO International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes into national law.

"Instead, we have a voluntary code of conduct, so-called '[self-regulation](#),' that is supposed to stop this marketing. But it clearly doesn't," he said.

"We also reveal how the Australian and New Zealand governments lobbied against other governments to weaken their efforts to regulate formula marketing. This goes completely against their supposed commitments to supporting women to breastfeed.

"What's also clear is that the milk formula industry has consistently, and at times aggressively, lobbied against the regulation of formula marketing in many countries."

The researchers say tactics used to sway compliant governments, including Australian governments, to avoid industry regulation are similar to the lobbying and advertising techniques used by the discredited tobacco industry.

"Milk formula companies are using an arsenal of sophisticated tactics to sell their products, including taking advantage of parents' worries about their child's health and development," Associate Professor Julie Smith, from the ANU College of Health and Medicine, said.

"The formula industry uses misleading information to suggest, with little evidence to support the science, that their products are solutions to common infant health and developmental challenges."

Associate Professor Smith said adverts infer that specialized formulas alleviate fussiness, help with colic, prolong night-time sleep and even encourage superior intelligence, despite studies showing no benefit of these product ingredients on academic performance or long-term cognition.

"These marketing techniques violate the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, which says labels should not idealize the use of milk formula and exploits poor science to create an untrue story to sell more products," she said.

Leading Australian dietician Dr. Rosemary Stanton, who was not involved in this research, said Australian policymakers must urgently implement the recommendations laid out in the papers.

"We have been concerned about marketing of infant formula and toddler milks for years and we addressed the issue in the last Infant Feeding Guidelines in 2012. But the problem is even worse now with digital marketing," Dr. Stanton said.

"There is no doubt that the papers' recommendations should be supported. At a global level we must have governments adopting a framework convention on the marketing of foods for infants and young children, and in Australia and New Zealand this must be given teeth."

Associate Professor Smith said in addition to abolishing manipulative marketing tactics, governments and workplaces must recognize the value of breastfeeding and [care work](#) to better support women who want to breastfeed.

This includes extending the duration of paid [maternity leave](#) to align with the six month WHO recommended duration of exclusive breastfeeding.

"Advice that breastfeeding is best for their babies' health is no use if women are not supported to understand and manage unsettled baby behaviors, or if mothers without maternity leave or pay are forced to go back to employment out of financial necessity," Associate Professor Smith said.

"These scientific papers bring together, for the first time, evidence of how baby milk companies reinforce and amplify parental anxieties and create gaps in food regulations, [health](#) care and employment systems, which companies exploit to push their product regardless of need."

More information: The Lancet, Unveiling the predatory tactics of the formula milk industry, *The Lancet* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)00118-6](#)

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