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Nestlé exposed: ‘science-based’ market leader continues to give contradictory and misleading advice on infant formula, one year on from investigation

- Follow-up to February 2018 report by Changing Markets Foundation and Globalization Monitor reveals that Nestlé continues to give contradictory nutritional advice on infant formula products in China and Hong Kong – despite making a commitment to end this practice last year
- Nestlé is also still breaching the WHO Marketing Code by comparing its products to breastmilk
- Huge price differential between Nestlé products on the same market, and between different markets, as parents in Hong Kong pay up to 4.5 times more than UK parents for comparable Nestlé infant formula
- Report concludes that Nestlé continues to use science merely as a marketing tool.

A new report from the Changing Markets Foundation and SumOfUs reveals that Nestlé has failed to act on a number of criticisms relating to the composition and claims of its baby milk formula products – despite making commitments last year to tackle the issue.

The report, *Based on science? Revisiting Nestle’s infant milk products and claims* reveals that Nestlé is continuing to provide contradictory advice or use claims that are prohibited by the WHO Marketing Code. This is despite commitments made by the company following a report by Changing Markets and the NGO Globalization Monitor in February 2018 which looked at Nestlé’s products and nutritional claims in over 40 countries.

Contradictory advice

The new report reveals that Nestlé continues to promote some of its products as healthier in Hong Kong and China (the fastest growing markets for infant formula) because they are free from vanilla flavourings, but has not removed vanilla flavourings from other products in the same markets. This is despite a pledge in March 2018 to remove the ingredient from its products and its nutritional advice, and no evidence to suggest that it is not possible for the Swiss conglomerate to have done so.

Nestlé has, however, acted on one of its commitments, removing sucrose from its products for babies aged 0-12 months.

New consumer survey commissioned by Changing Markets Foundation shows that companies are exploiting the trust of parents in Hong Kong and the UK.¹

The survey shows that many parents surveyed in both countries have fed their babies exclusively with formula (39% in the UK and 29% in Hong Kong) or have used formula in combination with breast-milk (42% in the UK and 67.5% in Hong Kong). In addition, survey reveals high levels of trust in the information provided by the baby milk formula producers:

- Half of UK and HK parents trust the information provided by baby milk producers.
- Only 20% of UK and 30% of HK parents say they looked for independent sources of information over trusting information provided by baby milk producers.

¹ Survey of 1,000 UK parents and 750 Hong Kong parents with children under 16, conducted by Censuswide in April 2019.

- 86% of HK parents and 70% of UK parents would be willing to pay a premium for a formula, if they thought it was better for their baby
- Only 8% of HK parents and 13% of UK parents do not believe in the added benefits marketed by premium infant formula brands.

Closest to breastmilk/inspired by human milk?

Nestlé is also found to market its products as being close to breastmilk or inspired by human milk, in breach of the WHO Marketing Code and subsequent resolutions. This puts Nestlé's scientific credibility into question, as there is a clear scientific consensus that formula can never be close to breastmilk.

An example is the *illumina* product in Hong Kong, which is sold under the trademark "Human Affinity Formula". Its website states that Nestlé is "*dedicated to unveil [sic] the mystery of human milk... replicating as nature intended with revolutionary technologies*".

Despite WHO's efforts, exclusive breastfeeding rates remain at around 40% globally, with breastfeeding figures notably lower in Hong Kong and mainland China, where a third of new-borns are given formula as their first feed.² Incidentally, these markets are two of the biggest and most lucrative markets for the formula milk industry, representing 43% of the total.³

Nusa Urbancic from the Changing Markets Foundation commented: "*Adequate nutrition for infants and young children is critical for healthy development. If mothers cannot or chose not to breastfeed, companies like Nestlé have a huge responsibility to provide products that are safe, nutritionally complete and informed by the best available science. Our report confirms that Nestlé continues to use science as merely a marketing tool, valuing higher profit margins over its scientific credibility.*"

Kate Qilton, Journalist and Presenter of Channel 4 Dispatches: The Great Formula Milk Scandal, adds: "*Being a parent is the hardest job in the world and it is made even more difficult when baby formula companies provide misleading and un-scientific advice. I'm tired of watching unsuspecting parents, who only want the best for their children, pay premium prices for formula milks which are all nutritionally equivalent.*"

"This ground-breaking Changing Markets report is an important step forward in holding big companies to account. They have an obligation to their customers to abide by the advised recommendations and I call on the rest of the industry to follow suit."

Premiumisation

The report uncovers that there is a big difference in pricing of Nestlé products between different markets. Feeding a 2-3-month baby for one month on the most expensive Nestlé formula in the UK would cost approximately £63.13/month – less than 3% of an average UK monthly wage. Using the most expensive Nestlé formula in Hong Kong would cost almost four times as much – nearly 16% of the average monthly wage.⁴

² Tang, L. et al. (2014) Widespread usage of infant formula in China: a major public health problem in birth 41(4), pp. 339-343.

³ Euromonitor, 2015 <http://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Milking-it-Final-report-CM.pdf>

⁴ Monthly average (nominal) wages were taken from the International Labour Organization (ILO) *Global Wage Report 2018/19*, based on national data. Available at:

https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_650553/lang--en/index.htm

For methodology used for calculations, please see: Changing Markets Foundation, European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Globalization Monitor, SumOfUs (2017) *Milking it: How milk formula companies are putting*

Research carried out between January and March 2019 by Globalization Monitor also found huge price differences between products within the same market. Nestlé sells five products in Hong Kong alone, with the most expensive 96.7% more costly than the cheapest. Such premiumisation is hugely problematic: infant formulas are nutritionally equivalent as all the ingredients that have proven benefits have to be added by law.⁵

Nickolas Tang, Project Officer, Globalization Monitor, said: *“We have conducted our research into formula milk companies' business practices out of an understanding of the importance of breastfeeding to infant health and how the inappropriate promotion of formula milk products can undermine breastfeeding. We are disappointed but ultimately unsurprised to find malpractices, such as unscientific product development, price discrimination, misleading and exaggerated promotion, cross-promotion of infant formula and the idealisation of formula feeding to be so serious and widespread. We hope our findings will spur appropriate and prompt improvements in how the industry is regulated and contribute to the global effort to protect and promote optimal breastfeeding practices and hold BMS manufacturers to account.”*

A previous report by Changing Markets and its partners identified over 400 products for babies under 12 months old sold by the biggest four companies and their subsidiaries on 14 markets; 165 of these were sold by Nestlé or Nestlé-owned subsidiary companies.

Sue Ashmore, Programme Director at Unicef UK, said: *“New mothers and families need more support and access to independent information - right from the very start – however they choose to feed their babies. There are dozens of infant milks on the supermarket shelves, many making claims of health-giving properties or the ability to control hunger, sleep, reflux, etc. There is little scientific evidence to back up these marketing claims – if a formula ingredient was definitely beneficial for infant health it would be in all infant formula by law. We urgently need better legislation to protect families from these misleading marketing claims, and better promotion of evidence based, unbiased information about infant feeding.”*

Eoin Dubsky, Campaign Manager at SumOfUs, comments: *“Last year, more than 120,000 people called on Nestlé to stop its manipulative marketing of infant formula to sleep-deprived and cash-strapped parents, who only want what's best for their children. This report shows that Nestlé is back to its old tricks and cannot be trusted to act in the best interest of babies. We are calling on the company to only sell affordable, safe infant formula that is truly based on the best nutritional science.”*

The report calls on Nestlé, as the market leader for infant formula, to demonstrate leadership in the industry in the following ways:

1. Truly utilise scientific research to create the best products for infant nutrition. If an ingredient is beneficial for infant health, it should be in all products. If ingredients (such as vanilla and vanilla flavourings) are not deemed healthy, they should be in none;
2. Conduct an independent review of its product range at a global level. The aim of this exercise must be to ensure that only infant milks with composition based on the best science are sold, and that these products are priced appropriately and fairly across all markets;

profits before science, p.53 [ONLINE] Available at: <http://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Milking-it-Final-report-CM.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-dispatches-asks-if-ps40billion-infant-formula-industry-putting-profit-babies>

3. Ensure its company policy aligns fully with the Code and implement this across all countries, regardless of national legislation, removing the arbitrary distinction between 'low risk' and 'high risk' countries.

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About Changing Markets:

The Changing Markets Foundation partners with NGOs on market-focused campaigns. Our mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy.

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