

UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative statement on formula company-funded study days – 16 December 2009

The UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative has recently received several enquires regarding study days sponsored by the formula milk industry. These have ranged from holding such a study day on NHS trust premises, to members of staff attending and speaking at these days.

Background

The Baby Friendly Initiative requires that all health-care facilities seeking Baby Friendly accreditation adhere to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Therefore, there should be no promotion of artificial feeding to mothers and their families. Information on formula milks provided to health professionals in order to allow them to support mothers who do not breastfeed, should be scientific, factual and free from promotion. UNICEF UK have long suggested that this is best achieved by one member of staff with sufficient expertise in infant feeding, gathering relevant information from all the companies and then disseminating this to the rest of the staff in a manner which can be easily understood, thereby saving them time and exposure to promotional and irrelevant information.

While many facilities now adopt this approach, the formula milk companies continue to mail staff directly with promotional material and invitations to attend study days, often for free. Expert staff are also invited to speak at these days. The arguments made for attending range from the topics covered at the days being relevant and helpful to practice, to the prohibitive cost of non-sponsored study days, to the assertion that there is no promotional element to the day, and even if there is, that the attendee will not be influenced by it. What is so often missing from these arguments is evidence of a full understanding of how commercial companies operate and the real purpose of a 'free' study day.

Study days: The companies' motives

Companies often present themselves to health professionals as philanthropic partners in the fight to protect and improve infant health and health professionals can easily be reassured by this. In reality, commercial companies exist for only one reason - to increase shareholder value by making as much profit as possible. For companies manufacturing formula milks this means selling more milk. To do this, they need to persuade parents to artificially feed rather than breastfeed and/or to choose their formula milk rather than a competitor's. While they may claim to want more mothers to breastfeed or for mothers to make an informed choice regarding which formula to use, this is in contradiction of their primary purpose.

Health professionals are the ideal conduit for promoting formula milk. They engender public trust and respect and have easy access to virtually all new mothers and babies. The 'halo effect' of having mothers associate the company brand with a health professional, be this a personal recommendation or simply a logo on a pen, is highly valued. However, for this to happen, the companies need access to those health professionals. As recently as ten years ago, access to health professionals was relatively easy. Company representatives had free access to many health-care premises and induced health professionals to attend their talks with hospitality and free materials. Students would be exposed to company lectures as part of their course and offers of free trips and nights out were common. With the advent of the Baby Friendly Initiative and increased support for breastfeeding in the health services, health professionals have

gradually become much more aware of the real purpose of this 'generosity' and its negative effect on breastfeeding and efforts to support informed choice. Subsequently, much of this easy access to health professionals has stopped.

This has resulted in the companies becoming ever more sophisticated in their approach. Sponsored study days are a highly effective mechanism for circumventing workplace controls on access by company representatives and so gaining direct access to health professionals. The study days no longer directly focus on breast and bottle feeding, which would only arouse suspicion, but rather are specialist in nature, focusing on, for example, allergy or growth, thus reassuring prospective participants of their legitimacy. Well qualified speakers are invited and these experts become a further inducement to attend and a quality assurance for the participants. They also provide the added bonus of enhancement of the company brand by association. Participants are asked to register for the study day, so providing the company with contact details for future promotional opportunities. At the event itself there are opportunities for introductions, closing statements, the odd lecture by company representatives and promotional materials that can be given to everyone who attends. On top of all this, there is the added advantage that the health professional is induced to feel grateful and well disposed towards the company for having the opportunity to attend. The result of this is health professionals who are highly aware of the company's brand and product, informed of the product's key selling points, in possession of company materials and possibly well disposed to the company providing them with 'free' education. If any of this is then passed on to parents, the company's outlay can be justified to shareholders as being designed to increase profits.

Making the choice

The Baby Friendly Initiative standards do not expressly prohibit health professionals' attendance at formula company study days. However, attendance is strongly discouraged. Any health professional considering attending such a day, should ask themselves:

- Whether attendance is really necessary for their education
- Whether it is compatible with their Code of Conduct and responsibilities to implement best practice
- How their attendance will reflect on their employing institution and its stated values
- Whether their name could be used to enhance the name and reputation of the formula company
- What effect their attendance could have on the families they serve.

If a decision is made to attend, the health professional should be highly aware of the true purpose of the day and make every effort to ensure that their attendance does not compromise the content, emphasis or tone of information imparted to parents.