SUMMARY OF CONCERNS

Unfortunately current UK marketing regulations do not cover breastpumps or feeding bottles and teats.

However, the Infant Formula and Follow-on Formula Regulations (2007) do state that “No person shall produce or publish any informational or educational material, whether written or audiovisual, dealing with the feeding of infants and intended to reach pregnant women and mothers of infants and young children, unless that material includes clear information...” The list of information includes “the possible negative effect on breast-feeding of introducing partial bottle-feeding”.

Accordingly, it may be possible for enforcement officers to issue Improvement Notices or bring prosecutions over Medela information that promotes its bottles as equivalent to breastfeeding without giving the required information.

Examples of advertising in the Breaks the Code - Strengthen the Law boxes are not permitted under the International Code and Resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly. These measures do cover feeding bottles and teats and state “there should be no advertising or other form of promotion to the general public of products within the scope of this Code”.

Companies should follow these standards independently of national measures, but the specific provisions need to be included in UK law to make them legally binding.

Baby Milk Action has sent this profile to the company and will update it if action is taken.

Contact details for enforcement officers:

Paul Furlong
Managing Director
Medela UK Ltd
Unit 3, Huntsman Drive
Northbank Industrial Park
Irlam, Manchester
M44 5EG

COMPANY HISTORY

All of the 50,000 shares in Medela UK Ltd are directly owned by the private company Medela Holding AG in Switzerland, where Medela was founded in 1961 by Olle Larsson. All his businesses were grouped under the roof of Olle Larsson Holding AG in 2001.

In 2013, Olle Larsson and his sons Michael and Göran transferred part of their family fortune into an independent, charitable foundation. This is called the Larsson-Rosenquist Foundation after Olle and his wife Doris Larsson-Rosenquist (above details from Companies House and company websites).

A Medela press release from 2015 states: “Medela is owned by the Larsson-Rosenquist Family Foundation.”

The UK company had sales of £10.7 million (generating profits of over £800,000) in 2015, the last year for which accounts are available.

ENCOURAGING USE OF BREASTPUMPS

Medela markets breastpumps and feeding bottles. Its promotion of these products is in the context of breastfeeding and the benefits of breastmilk.

Breastpumps are outside the scope of the UK Regulations and the Code. Bottles are covered by the Code.

However, in promoting its breastpumps, Medela undermines the information from NHS Choices, which states:

Some women find it easier to express milk by hand than to use a pump, especially in the first few days or weeks. It also means you won’t have to buy or borrow a pump, or rely on an electricity supply.

Hand expressing allows you to encourage milk to flow from a particular part of the breast. This may be useful, for example, if one of the milk ducts in your breast becomes blocked.

Medela does not appear to mention the possibility of hand expressing in any of its information, which might be expected as it has an underlying aim of selling products.

Medela focuses on the benefits of breastmilk, rather than breastfeeding.

It stresses the benefits of pumps in terms of enabling other family members and carers to bottle feed the child.
Medela promotes Calma feeding bottles separately from its breastpumps (as shown right). The name itself is a claim. Medela suggests feeding with the bottle is equivalent to breastfeeding and enables easy transition between breast and bottle feeding.

The Medela Moments blog cites supposed benefits of the Calma bottle, but links to reviews by parenting bloggers, not scientific studies.

While Medela suggests equivalence with breastfeeding, comments on Medela’s own website report problems with babies choking using the Calma teat. Medela’s standard response suggests babies have to learn to suck on the teat differently from how they breastfeed (see a health worker’s comment and Medela’s response below).

Medela’s response contradicts the claim used in its marketing: “With Calma babies do not have to change their natural behaviour.”

Medela sponsors #medelamum bloggers to review its products and write posts with Medela branding. Bloggers report receiving products and being sponsored by Medela to attend events, one declaring:

“Medela have paid for my ticket, travel and accommodation for BritMums Live.

“In return I have promised to promote products.”
INFORMATION FOR MOTHERS

The medela.co.uk website promotes “breast milk feeding”, rather than “breastfeeding”. The information it provides is assessed below.

There is clear information about the benefits of breastfeeding. Mothers are encouraged to use expressed breastmilk rather than formula. Medela states: “No formula can match your breast milk’s unique properties, no matter how many vitamins, minerals and supplements are added to what is, in fact, nothing more than a chemical formulation.”

Its Frequently Asked Questions leaflet responds to the question “How often should I feed my baby?” as follows:

“Generally speaking, you will be advised to feed your baby when he is hungry, usually anywhere from 6 to 10/12 times a day. This is called feeding on demand and it is very important for growing your milk supply at the same pace as your baby’s needs increase. Your breastmilk supply will adjust to your baby’s appetite and growth rate.”

The Medela breast milk feeding smartphone app encourages mothers to record every breastfeed, expression, bottle feed and nappy change.

Focusing on measurement lends itself more to feeding known volumes of milk through graduated bottles.

TARGETING HEALTH WORKERS

Medela claims it is “No. 1 choice of hospitals and mothers”. It is very much part of the company's marketing strategy to target hospitals and health workers. The company accounts for 2015 (the latest available) highlight as a risk to its business: “Political change and lack of investment in the National Health Service”.

The company was advertising for a Business Manager Healthcare - UK in June 2017. Responsibilities include:

- Develop productive working relationships with Hospitals, Third party distributors and Healthcare professionals as required.
- Maintain and develop clinical relationships with KOLs [Key Opinion Leaders], GPs, Consultants, Healthcare Surgeons and Specialist Nurses.
- Liaise with Medela AG [MAG] to assist in the MAG team visiting customers and setting up clinical work and research trials in new therapy areas.
- Define and execute UK Healthcare regional targets aligned with MAG and in line with the UK Strategy for the year and targeted potential and current high volume customers.
- Develop the UK Healthcare Marketing Plan. Work collaboratively with MAG Marketing to implement an effective strategic plan, develop and propose continuous optimal sales organisation structure to achieve desired market position.