



Environmental campaigning - the risks for infant health



Two ways to campaign

Far left: The poster - part sponsored by L'Oreal/Nestlé - which appeared all over France in July and has saddened health advocates.

Near left: the advertisement placed by the World Wildlife Fund in the Observer Magazine on 1 May. This has the same aim, to reduce environmental pollution, but does not do harm.

Chemical contamination - what are the concerns?

If we tested every infant born today, anywhere in the world, he/she would have a body burden of toxic chemicals which will have been passed from parent to child even before birth. Tiny doses of these chemicals can have a dramatic effect on the developing child, damaging the immune and nervous systems. The chemicals not only cross the placenta, they are found in fatty body secretions such as breastmilk, semen and even ear wax.

Campaigns to reduce dioxins and Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) have - over the years - reduced the levels of harmful chemicals found in these body secretions. However, new technologies are creating new chemicals which build up in the body and show up in a similar way. Flame retardants (a group of 70 chemicals) anti-bacterials (Triclosan) and artificial fragrances can all act as hormone disrupters and can be cancer related. Some of these new chemicals have chemical properties similar to PCBs.

If levels of contamination are allowed to increase unchecked, breastmilk could become more contaminated. But in this case the health of the unborn child would be already severely compromised and the immune protection and other benefits provided by breastfeeding would be even more important. Breastfeeding, even in a contaminated environment, has a positive impact on development, building a stronger immune system, and counteracting many of the longer-term adverse developmental effects of the pollutants.

Artificial baby milks are more contaminated than breastmilk, in different ways. They have been found to contain phthalates, bisphenol A, aluminium and heavy metals, GM ingredients, phytoestrogens and spore bacteria. Any increase in artificial feeding would result in greater contamination of the environment.

Responsible NGOs working to reduce environmental pollution focus on the industrial sources of contamination - not on breastfeeding.

For action ideas see: www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/safer_chemicals
www.wwf.org.uk/chemicals/problem.asp, www.wen.org.uk
Contact Baby Milk Action for position papers on this subject including the results of WHO's Study on the levels of PCBs in Human Milk.

A poster campaign which appeared all over Paris and other French cities in July, just before World Breastfeeding Week, has outraged and saddened health advocates. The poster shows a breast dribbling a dirty, oily fluid - alongside the name of a private foundation which is run by the French TV journalist and green campaigner, Nicolas Hulot. The website of the foundation - www.planet-nature.org - is part sponsored by L'Oreal, which is part owned by Nestlé. IBFAN, LLL and many other groups have written to Nicolas Hulot, but, since the posters were already in place, the damage had been done.

The failure of Mr Hulot to consult widely before running with this campaign, contrasts with the British environmental groups, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the Women's

Environmental Network and the World Wildlife Fund, who, in December 2002 spent a day with Baby Milk Action, the National Childbirth Trust and others to discuss tactics for a joint campaign to call for phasing out - wherever feasible - of harmful chemicals which build up in the body. There is strong opposition from the chemical industry to such controls, so all the groups were aware of the importance of engaging the public as much as possible in the campaign. The idea of focussing on breastmilk was discussed, but thrown out. The groups realised that such a campaign might well backfire, resulting in women being frightened away from breastfeeding and undermining their children's health. The WWF advertisement above right is an example of how this campaign can be handled. (UD32 pp 10, 11)