

AAP

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SECOND OPINIONS

Concerns expressed over book distribution strategy

On Aug. 6, 2002, the Academy released the *New Mother's Guide to Breastfeeding*, published by Bantam Books and edited by lactation expert and advocate, Joan Meek, M.D., FAAP. This book joins other AAP initiatives to support breastfeeding, including the 1997 Policy Statement *Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk*⁽¹⁾ and the recent establishment of the AAP Section on Breastfeeding. However, the Academy's subsequent decision to sell 330,000 copies of this book to Ross Laboratories (an infant formula manufacturer), and to allow the name and the product logo of "Ross Pediatrics" to emblazon a cover of the book beside the AAP name and logo, has landed the Academy in the middle of an ethical controversy.^(2,3) The goals of this letter are to provide AAP membership with information about the issue and offer our opinion to encourage discussion and debate.

News of the sale elicited strong reaction from numerous groups, including members of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Lawrence M. Gartner, M.D., FAAP, chair of the Executive Committee of the Section on Breastfeeding, in a letter to AAP leadership dated Aug. 27, 2002, wrote, "This imprint gives the reader of the book the distinct impression that the book was sponsored by an infant formula manufacturer and may contain material which is favorable to the commercial interests of the company. More specifically, the potential reader may have the unfortunate impression that the book will not contain full scientific and clinical facts about breastfeeding and lactation that a book from the Academy should contain. In short, it devalues an excellent and important book." He continued, "Others of us found out (about the sale) when we read the first of many hundreds of e-mail letters protesting this action by the Academy. You have seen and read these letters. Why were we not consulted on this matter?"⁽⁴⁾

In defense of the AAP decision, Joe M. Sanders Jr., M.D., FAAP, AAP executive director, in an e-mail response to AAP members who sent letters of protest, stated, "This book is part of ongoing AAP educational effort to provide parents and caregivers with high-quality information on a broad spectrum of children's health issues." In addition, he commented, "Ross Pediatrics has purchased a quantity of the *New Mother's Guide to Breastfeeding* to use in place of a breastfeeding booklet they previously developed and distributed. It is our understanding that these books will be distributed by health care professionals in hospitals and pediatric offices to new mothers. The appearance of a company's name on the cover of a book indicates only that the book is a free copy given by the company. The Ross Pediatrics name only appears on the quantity of books purchased by Ross Pediatrics. No formula advertisement appears in any copies of the book."⁽⁵⁾

Both the Academy and Ross Labs benefited from the arrangement. The Academy received significant revenue from the large purchase, and the bulk sale jettisoned the book to the Amazon.com best-seller list, which will surely boost future profits. Ross Labs links their name (and by default, their products) with the Academy, which lends them credibility and implies AAP endorsement of their particular brand of formula. However, the crucial question must be: Does the arrangement benefit breastfeeding women and their newborns?

The Academy claims that the sale will ensure a larger circulation of the book, and thus more new mothers will be better educated about breastfeeding. However, the evidence suggests that formula company "promotion" of breastfeeding can have a deleterious effect. One case in point is the commercial infant discharge pack. Formula company products regularly state that breastfeeding is best, and their infant discharge packs frequently contain breastfeeding guidelines. However, research has demonstrated that distribution of infant formula company baby

bags — a carefully designed, direct-to-consumer advertising strategy masquerading as a gift to new families via hospital staff — undermines breastfeeding success, regardless of whether they contain infant formula.⁽⁶⁻¹⁰⁾

The Academy defends this decision stating it follows "industry" guidelines that allow commercial companies to subsidize education campaigns, in return for name/logo recognition. One example is the Proctor & Gamble support of the Back to Sleep Campaign. However, the AAP position on infant feeding is at odds with the desired outcome of the infant formula company, whose mission is to sell more formula. In this case, a negative health outcome results if the consumer uses the commercial product. Certainly there would be an uproar were a cigarette company allowed, for the right price, to attach their name and animal logo to an AAP book on *Health Tips for Teens*, and give these books to clinic and hospital staff for distribution to adolescents after a checkup.

One of the reasons this arrangement drew such protest is the litany of historical events involving the marketing strategies of infant formula manufacturers dating back to the turn of the 20th century. Examples of these historical markers include: the "Milk and Murder Speech" by Dr. Cicely Williams; the *Baby Killer* pamphlet published by War on Want; filmmaker Peter Krieg's *Bottle Babies*; milk nurses; the international Nestle boycott; the 118-1 vote on the Code; and even the controversial free commercial discharge bags.⁽¹¹⁾ Some organizations like the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, the International Lactation Consultants Association, and La Leche League International support the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes, established by the World Health Organization in 1981 in response to aggressive formula company marketing. These organizations support breastfeeding, even at the expense of annual revenue. Formula company booths and sales representatives (and their associated "freebies") are not allowed at annual meetings. Financial subsidies for educational materials are not accepted. Health organization awards subsidized and named for infant formula sponsors do not exist.^(12, 13)

Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the infant feeding issue, the manner in which the Academy sold these books to Ross, without the knowledge of or input from the book's authors, editors or members of the Section on Breastfeeding, including the chair of the Executive Committee⁽⁴⁾ also is objectionable. It is unfortunate and regrettable that this admirable work by Dr. Meek and other members of the Section is being discredited by controversy. A more formal process of decision-making would be suitable in such a controversial area.⁽¹⁴⁾ Clear guidelines would eliminate charges of secrecy as well as assure future collaborators on AAP materials that marketing standards will be followed.

In our era of instant messaging, news travels fast. E-mails and letters of protest from around the world have swamped the Academy on this issue, while sizzling Internet listservs have jeopardized our reputation with reproach, and in some cases, ridicule. Indeed, the controversy landed on the front page of the business section of The New York Times.⁽¹⁵⁾ AAP leadership should heed the repercussions precipitated by this incident and exercise scrupulous caution in current and future interactions with all infant formula manufacturers. We believe the Academy should move quickly to review thoroughly AAP association with infant formula companies and its commitment to the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes. Only then can our organization lead the national and international effort to improve breastfeeding rates for the welfare of children everywhere.