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February 18th 2021

Dear X

A supporter of the Baby Feeding Law Group has shared with us an invitation she received to the British Journal of Midwifery Virtual Conference streaming live on Tuesday 24th – Wednesday 25th March, for which you have agreed to be a speaker. Your session is listed as “Sponsored by Nutricia, the breastmilk substitute manufacturer also called Danone.

As I am sure you are aware, the UK government is a signatory to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (including all subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions), which aims to protect the health of women, infants and young children. The Code and resolutions exist to stop the inappropriate marketing of infant formula and any milks (or products and foods that could be used to replace milks, including specialist milks) that are specifically marketed for feeding infants and young children up to the age of 3 years, as well as bottles and teats. The Code and resolutions are integral to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

WHA resolution 69.9 states that sponsorship of meetings by health professionals by the breastmilk substitute industry should not be allowed. You may also be aware health professionals working in Unicef UK Baby Friendly accredited settings work within the Code, and currently 60% of maternity settings, 73% of health visiting services as well as many university courses, neonatal units and children’s centres in the UK are accredited and many more are on their Baby Friendly journey. Staff in these settings avoid industry funded meetings as part of their commitment to protecting breastfeeding.

Sponsored study days are a highly effective mechanism for companies to circumvent workplace controls on company representatives’ access to health workers. The specialist nature of events such as the meeting in question reassures the prospective participants of their legitimacy, and engaging highly qualified speakers, such as yourself, acts as a further inducement to attend, providing quality assurance for participants. However, sponsorship ultimately serves to promote the company’s brands and products by association.

As you know, the UK currently has the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world, and this has enormous implications for the physical and mental health and well-being of mothers and their

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children. The current COVID-19 pandemic makes this situation more concerning than ever. The promotion of breastmilk substitutes to health professionals and families has been highlighted in global health journals as causative in undermining breastfeeding. Added to which, companies have been capitalising on the pandemic in their marketing efforts (Van Tulleken, C., Wright, C., Brown, A., McCoy, D., Costello, A. Marketing of breastmilk substitutes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lancet, 396, E58).

Within the UK we are working hard to ensure that all families are supported with appropriate advice on infant and young child feeding through programmes such as Unicef Baby Friendly and through national and local actors and activities that are independent of commercial involvement. Danone Nutricia is a multi-national company that violates the International Code on Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in the UK and globally. We have summarised the reasons Danone Nutricia seek partnerships with individuals and organisations that support pregnant women, infants and young children, and a review of how their marketing has been evaluated globally here:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c6bb04a65a70771b7cbc916/t/5e2b34cbf5b1055fa3ae2eb4/1579889869470/BFLG+UK+Danone_Nutricia_corporate_partner_doc_Jan2020.pdf. We enclose a copy of this report for your reference.

For the reasons outlined above, we are writing to you to urge you to reconsider participating. Given your professional background we know you are already well aware of the importance of optimal infant and young child feeding to maximise health outcomes for both children and their mothers, in the short and long term. We can only achieve these optimal outcomes if we all work together to give consistent and independent information to our peer professionals and the families we support.

Lastly, it is hard to ignore the outline of your session which seems to suggest that all parents need detailed advice of a qualified health professional to be able to select an appropriate infant formula from the 'ever increasing range of available infant formulas'. We hope that any advice you give on this subject adheres to NHS recommendations (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/bottle-feeding/types-of-formula/>) and we would like to draw your attention to

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the independent advice on infant milks provided by First Steps Nutrition Trust that can be found here: <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/infant-milks-health-workers>.

If you would like to discuss any of these issues further, or find out any more about the BFLG-UK, do please get in touch with me at vicky@firststepsnutrition.org.

Yours sincerely

Victoria Sibson

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