

Book review

Book Title

Governments Push Infant Formula. By George Kent. Irene Publishing, 2017. 194p. ISBN-13: 978-9188061188

Review Author

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Review

In this book, Prof George Kent details the ways in which some governments around the world became partners of the human milk substitutes industry, which may represent a threat to the health of millions of children.

The author explains that breastfeeding (and not just human milk) is ideal for infants and young children, as well as their mothers, with scientific evidence presented throughout the text. He suggests that human milk substitutes should only be considered as a last-resort solution, as they are only a pale nutritional copy of human milk, far from equaling the original, most notably in terms of health effects.

From this observation, made at the beginning of the book, and discussed in more detail in its final chapters, Kent uses three case studies to show that some governments distribute these breast milk substitutes (BMS) to millions of children every year, at the expense of population health. The author demonstrates, in very clear and precise language, that the public authorities in Chile, Egypt and the United States of America promote BMS in very large-scale programs. The intention may be good, with the aim of alleviating hunger among the poorest segments of the population, but the large-scale replacement of breastfeeding with BMS is no less prejudicial in the long run.

Kent then suggests that governments divert this money and invest it in better support for breastfeeding. He also describes concrete, existing, solutions for mothers who cannot or do not wish to breastfeed: milk expression, breastfeeding by another woman, access to milk banks. The second part of the book focuses on these solutions. All of these solutions could be tested in large scale settings, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in the USA.

Prof Kent reminds us of the principle of adequate nutrition as a fundamental right for children and introduces the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, developed by the World Health Organization in 1981. By supplying BMS at a very low or even no cost, some governments might be violating these principles and, in any case, are not promoting breastfeeding adequately. In this book, Kent not only depicts a health scandal, but also a moral one.

The book would have benefited from a deeper discussion of the reasons behind these choices made by some governments. The author offers some explanations, but the role of the BMS industry in maintaining this status quo is certainly much more important than it would appear from the book. The author introduces the concept of reductionism, where the act of breastfeeding is too often presented simply as feeding infant and young children with a liquid, made of a sum of nutrients. There is evidence that this reductionist approach in nutrition is the result of decades of influence on the part of industry (Scrinis, 2013).

In short, this excellent book presents a radically different vision of what early life could be for children in some countries around the world, and, although focused on the distribution of BMS by governments, it opens the dialogue to much broader issues, such as the human right of children to adequate nutrition. This book will be of great interest to policy makers, especially those working in the field of public health nutrition, but also mothers, who may not realize the disastrous impact governments' decisions can have on the health of their children.

References

Scrinis, G. (2013). *Nutritionism : the science and politics of dietary advice* (p. 352). New York: Columbia University Press.