

Violation of law rampant in healthcare units

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Unethical marketing practices of breast milk substitute manufacturers are rampant at the healthcare facilities and free samples of formula milk are being distributed among doctors, nurses, midwives and lactating mothers.

"Also promotional-informational material relating to infant and young child feeding is being distributed at healthcare facilities without any check and despite seven years of issuance of 'Protection of Breastfeeding & Child Nutrition Ordinance 2002', not a single case has been registered against formula milk manufacturers, distributors or health workers involved in illegal marketing practices," said Head of Community Medicines at Islamabad Medical & Dental College Colonel (r) Professor Dr Muhammad Ashraf Chaudhry while talking to 'The News' in connection with World Breastfeeding Week which is being observed from August 1-7 in more than 120 countries including Pakistan.

"Moreover, notification of rules and regulations of Breastfeeding Ordinance 2002 by the government is still awaited. One of the factors which greatly undermine the ability of mothers to breastfeed is the promotion of breast milk substitutes," said Dr Ashraf.

President of Pakistan had issued 'Protection of Breastfeeding & Child Nutrition Ordinance 2002' on October 26, 2002. Under this ordinance, National Infant Feeding Board met under the chairmanship of federal minister of health and provincial infant feeding committees were constituted headed by the provincial health ministers.

According to the ordinance, no person shall in any manner assert that any designated product is a substitute for mother's milk or that it is equivalent to, comparable with or superior to mother's milk. No manufacturer or distributor shall donate any designated product and equipment free of charge or at low cost to a healthcare facility. No manufacture, distributor or any person engaged by them shall produce or distribute any educational or informational material relating to infant and young child feeding.

To a query, Dr Ashraf said that the ordinance says that no designated product shall be

marketed or sold in Pakistan unless its label is in accordance with the provisions of this ordinance and the rules. Label or designated product shall be designed so not to discourage breastfeeding and shall provide the necessary information in Urdu. Label shall not contain anything that may discourage breastfeeding. Label shall contain a conspicuous notice in bold characters stating that "mother's milk is best food for your baby and helps in preventing diarrhoea and other illnesses," said Dr Ashraf.

According to the ordinance, health workers shall encourage, support and protect breastfeeding and shall not accept or give samples of any designated product to any person. Violator of this ordinance shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine which shall not be less than rupees fifty thousand, or more than five hundred thousand rupees, or both and suspension or cancellation of licence.

Dr Ashraf said that implementation of this ordinance is very complicated and there are many ambiguous terms that need to be explained or clarified in rules and regulations of the breastfeeding ordinance. "Under this ordinance, boards or committees have only advisory role; whereas they should have role of regulatory nature," he suggested.

The right to initiate complaints and cases before the court should be given to boards/committees/executive district officers (health) and doctors should be answerable to their registration authority (PM&DC) and should be litigated against in a civil court, under the violations of this ordinance. "The right to file a case under section 13 is reserved to federal government only; it should be extended to provincial governments and district health officers also," said Dr Ashraf.

He suggested that the role of the inspectors should be clearly defined. "The ordinance should make it obligatory on the part of the board to investigate all complaints received." Dr Ashraf said that keeping in view the flaws in the ordinance, there is a dire need to expedite the process of rules and regulations of the breastfeeding ordinance, which are pending since last seven years with the health and law ministries.

Shabban-ul-Moazzam 9, 1430 A.H.

Saturday
August 1, 2009

THE NEWS INTERNATIONAL