European Union may relax rules on marketing baby milk

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Health organisations fear that negotiations now taking place to update European Union legislation on infant formula could dilute existing restrictions on the health and nutritional claims companies may make for their products.

They are also pressing the EU to incorporate fully into European legislation the World Health Organization's *International Code of Marketing Breast-milk Substitutes* and subsequent resolutions which EU countries have supported at various World Health Assemblies.

Adopted in 1981, the code calls for exclusive breast feeding for the first six months of a baby's life and contains provisions laying down clear boundaries on marketing substitutes for breast milk.

Under the procedures for revising the 1991 legislation, the proposed text will be made public only after the European Commission has completed its confidential discussions with national officials. Then the draft will be sent to stakeholders, such as the industry and non-governmental organisations, for their comments—probably early next

year. The European Parliament will also be consulted, but MEPs have no power to vote amendments to the text as they do in other areas of policy. The final decision lies with a committee of national civil servants. If a sufficient majority supports the proposed changes, the commission can implement them.

The commission, which is working with national government officials to revise the 13 year old EU legislation, points out that the union was one of the first to implement large parts of the non-binding code. The commission stresses, however, that the social, economic, and cultural features of the EU's member states must also be taken into account.

For instance, the code states that advertising infant formula should be totally banned. But, at the insistence of some governments, European rules allow limited advertising in scientific and specialised baby care publications.

The International Code Documentation Centre, which monitors implementation of the code worldwide, however, recently wrote to David Byrne, the outgoing European public

health commissioner, claiming that its contents were being "sidestepped and ignored" as the 1991 legislation is updated.

It claimed, for instance, that the promotion of exclusive breast feeding in the first six months was being undermined by moves to define infant formula as "foodstuffs for nutritional use of infants for the first months of life."

Baby milk campaigners fear that the revision exercise will

lead to a relaxation in the claims which manufacturers may make for their products. That, they say, would be in direct contradiction to the recent EU funded blueprint for action on the protection, promotion, and support for breast feeding in Europe.

The European Commission stresses that it is too early to state whether the redrafting exercise will make any changes to the restrictive list of permitted health claims. □

MARTIN LEE/REX

The final decision on the marketing of infant formula lies with a committee of civil servants from EU countries

WHO denies suppressing report on junk food

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

Officials at the World Health Organization denied this week that they had suppressed a report recommending that curbs on junk food advertising should be incorporated into global food standards. It had been accused of burying the report in order to appease the food industry.

Health activist Bruce Silverglade of the US based Center for Science in the Public Inter-

est, released a copy of the report to journalists last week saying that he feared that WHO was suppressing "a series of sensible ground breaking recommendations" for reforming global food standards.

Colin Tukuitonga, coordinator in WHO's Primary Prevention of Chronic Diseases section, said Mr Silverglade had been "unhelpful and mischievous"

because there was no question about whether WHO should use global food standards as a vehicle to implement its global strategy on diet, physical activity, and health.

The strategy was adopted by WHO's 192 member states in May. It aims to help millions of people avoid obesity and other chronic diseases by adopting a healthy diet.

Dr Tukuitonga said that the report, *Food Standardisation to Support the Reduction of Chronic Diseases*, was commissioned to find ways that the Codex Alimentarius, a set of global food standards drawn up by the Food

and Agriculture Organization and WHO, could support and promote the goals of the global strategy.

These goals include limits on amounts of saturated fats, trans fatty acids, sugar, and salt in processed food and calls on companies to adhere to "clear and consistent food labelling practices" to help consumers make more healthy choices.

"This was an internal research report and there was never any intention to publish it," Dr Tukuitonga said, adding that it was completed in July and considered for the first time at a meeting in Bonn this month. □