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Back Organisations oppose repeal of infant foods Act

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WILL companies manufacturing infant milk substitutes and infant food once again be able to advertise their products and promote them among doctors and in hospitals? A slew of organisations fear so, as they vociferously oppose the Ministry of Food Processing Industries' proposal to repeal the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 1992 and Amendment Act, 1992 and Amendment Act 2003 (IMS Act).

Among the organisations that see the repealing of this Act as a step that will put "the lives of millions of infants and young children at risk" is the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and the Indian Academy of Paediatrics and the National Neonatology Forum.

They feel that the repealing of this particular Act will once again give companies manufacturing infant milk substitutes and infant food a licence to openly push their products.

The Government, on its part, has suggested repealing the IMS Act amongst other Acts in order to integrate the food laws and avoid multiple levels of licensing and other approvals, a long pending demand of the food industry.

A Group of Ministers (GoM) has been set up to propose the legislative changes necessary for finalising the modern integrated food law and on January 15, the Ministry posted the proposed Bill, the Food Safety and Standards Bill 2005, on its Web site for comments from the public.

Dr Arun Gupta of the BPNI who is co-ordinating the effort to save the IMS Act feels that there is "absolutely no conflict" between the two legislations and that the proposed 2005 Bill operates in an altogether different field.

"The IMS Act seeks to promote breastfeeding by curbing unethical marketing and promotional practices which denigrate mother's milk or interferes with breastfeeding. In so far as food standards and safety issues are concerned, the IMS Act leaves those to be regulated by the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act (PFA). The proposed new Bill primarily covers areas covered by the PFA, hence, the IMS Act should be left alone," he says.

Dr Dharma Prakash, Finance Secretary of the IMA and Co-ordinator of the breastfeeding movement, explains that the IMS Act was a decade-long effort to prevent repeated infection in infants and bring down the incidence of diarrhoea and early infancy diseases and death.

"It is in the interest of the nation to promote and protect breastfeeding and so many studies have shown that the sickness rate goes down to almost zero when breastfeeding is adopted. We are not against food manufacturers, but with the repealing of the IMS Act, companies manufacturing

infant milk substitutes and infant food will once again be back with offering free samples to patients and doctors and start sponsoring events," he says.

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