



## Statement on Promoting Breastfeeding and Interaction of Paediatric Associations with Providers of Nutritional Products

**ESPGHAN, October 2022**

Paediatric associations have been urged not to interact with and not to accept sponsorship from commercial manufacturers of breast milk substitutes (BMS), based on an assumption that doing so would lead to diminished promotion of and support for breastfeeding. This short statement by the European Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) explains the Society's approach to this issue and outlines the reasoning for its position as well as the steps that ESPGHAN takes to ensure transparency, accountability and the highest standards of professional behaviour<sup>1</sup>.

ESPGHAN is a multi-professional organisation whose aim is to promote the health of children through knowledge creation, the dissemination of science-based information, the promotion of best practice in the delivery of care and the provision of high-quality education for paediatric gastroenterology, hepatology and nutrition professionals in Europe and beyond.

The Society has consistently supported and promoted breastfeeding as the optimal method of infant feeding through its publications<sup>2</sup> and educational activities, emphasising the importance of an evidence-based approach.

ESPGHAN welcomes public scrutiny of the relationship between associations and industry, which is why the Society has engaged positively in this debate. In 2020, ESPGHAN along with colleagues from six other European Paediatric Associations, published its position on interaction with providers of nutritional products in the journal *Frontiers in Pediatrics*<sup>3</sup>. On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022, ESPGHAN representatives attended an event held at the European Parliament organised in collaboration with the European Academy of Paediatrics (EAP) and supported by three MEPs that are trained as physicians (Drs. Peter Liese, Manuel Pizarro and Andreas Glück), entitled *Breastfeeding promotion and a public-private partnership for infant nutrition: are they compatible?*. Attendees included stakeholders from paediatric scientific organisations, the WHO, parent organisations and industry.

Further to that meeting, ESPGHAN's position is as follows:

- All paediatricians should promote, protect and support breastfeeding as the best way to feed infants

- The reasons for low breastfeeding rates in European countries are varied, multiple and complex. They include lack of information and support for parents, societal and cultural attitudes, inadequate parental leave from work and marketing practices for BMS<sup>3</sup>
- The assumption that BMS marketing practices or commercial sponsorship/support of scientific meetings and educational events organised by paediatric associations is a major (or even a significant) explanatory factor for low breastfeeding rates is not based on accountable evidence<sup>3</sup>. European countries with similar regulatory approaches to BMS marketing have different breastfeeding rates<sup>4</sup>. An undue focus on marketing alone could actually be a distraction, leading to a lack of consideration and action on the more important but difficult to address socio-cultural aspects and lack of timely practical breastfeeding support for new mothers
- The majority of European infants will receive a BMS in the first year of life, even if they are exclusively breast-fed in the first months. Sales of BMS are expected to be higher when breastfeeding rates are lower, as BMS are the only safe and recommended alternative to breast milk during the first year of life; this does not mean that infant formula *causes* mothers not to breast-feed or to breast-feed for shorter periods than recommended
- Financial support of medical education events by commercial organisations should be considered acceptable if scientific, ethical, societal and legal standards are followed. Conferences and educational events which are part of continuing medical education (CME) should be organised under the direction and supervision, and within the regulatory framework, of independent scientific societies, professional organisations, governmental or public bodies. These bodies should ensure that programmes are balanced, provide evidence-based information and strictly exclude any influence of commercial interests
- All interactions between BMS companies and paediatric associations should be governed by robust and transparent procedures to mitigate the risk of perceived or actual inappropriate influence on healthcare professional (HCP) behaviour
- ESPGHAN believes that this process could be further strengthened, for example, by including processes similar to those currently governing HCP interactions with pharmaceutical companies, or by adopting the approach used in the ESPGHAN 'Education Partners' Programme<sup>5</sup>

Note: This programme was launched in 2015 based on the ESPGHAN Code of Conduct<sup>1</sup>. Four of eight current members are manufacturers of BMS. The EPP scheme enables ESPGHAN to deliver a programme of around 15 educational events in paediatric gastroenterology, hepatology & nutrition each year, free from industry influence on content or delivery.



- Proposed restrictions on the relationship between industry and medical associations should only be considered in the context of the existing local regulatory framework and with due regard to the loss of resource required by associations to support medical education. A complete ban on sponsorship and support of medical education by BMS companies would mean that the educational programmes and activities outlined above would cease, as there is currently no alternative public funding source. This would prevent ESPGHAN from fulfilling its goal of delivering high quality education and unfairly discriminate against paediatrics when compared to other branches of medicine who have no limitations on commercial support or sponsorship.

ESPGHAN welcomes the opportunity to offer an open and transparent position and hopes to continue to engage on this topic based on evidence and facts involving all stakeholders including patients, healthcare professionals, medical associations and industry, with the aim of promoting breastfeeding and delivering high quality medical education.

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#### **Notes to readers [hyperlinked]:**

<sup>1</sup><https://www.espghan.org/our-organisation/governance-and-regulation>

<sup>2</sup>[Fewtrell M, et al. JPGN 2017;64:119-132](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Bognar Z et al. Frontiers in Peds 2020;8:article 562870](#)

<sup>4</sup>[Theurich MA et al. JPGN 2019;68:400-407](#)

<sup>5</sup><https://www.espghan.org/knowledge-center/education/Education-Partner-Programme>

