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EXCLUSIVE

Danone's use of midwives to give branded infant feeding advice in supermarket sparks anger

Campaigners for impartial nutritional advice are dismayed at a service that seems to be adopting marketing tactics dubbed scandalous 50 years ago. **Rebecca Coombes** reports

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The UK supermarket giant Tesco is being urged to drop an “unethical” pilot of an in-store infant feeding advice service in which midwives funded by the formula milk firm Danone are expected to wear branded uniforms and undergo training by the company.

Critics said the initiative, running in a Tesco flagship store and set to be rolled out shortly,¹ was a backward step and reminiscent of the “milk nurses” scandal of the 1970s, in which formula industry salespeople dressed as nurses to promote formula milk to parents.

One midwife hired by Danone quit the pilot last month at the Tesco Extra store in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, telling *The BMJ* that she couldn't be associated with an “unethical” service.

A spokesperson for Danone UK and Ireland said that it intended only to provide “impartial, nutritional expertise,” that the branded uniforms were optional, and that it was happy to “take on board feedback.”

Tesco said it intended to continue the pilot in two further stores in the first months of this year, “providing the same support from healthcare professionals.”

Tesco's venture came as the UK Competition and Markets Authority prepared to deliver findings of its investigation into the formula milk industry.² Its interim report highlighted a “lack of timely, clear and impartial information for parents and carers about formula” and said that parents seemed to be paying “over the odds.”

Prices for baby formula milk in the UK rose by between 18% and 36%, depending on the brand, in the two years since December 2021.

The midwife who left the Tesco role after several shifts, and who asked to remain anonymous, said that the role was well paid at £40 an hour, twice what she earned in her community role. Alarm bells started to ring when she discovered Danone's involvement through its Aptacub baby club. Aptacub has the same colour palette, font, and imagery as Danone's Aptamil products.

The midwife told *The BMJ*, “Because of the history, I just don't want to be associated with formula companies breaking the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes. It's unethical. That was the line I couldn't cross—women trust me because I am a midwife.”

The code,³ adopted by the World Health Organization and Unicef in 1981 and as law in more than 100 countries, states that “marketing personnel” should avoid direct or indirect contact with “pregnant women or with mothers of infants and young children.” UK law covers some but not all the code's provisions.⁴

The midwife who was involved in the pilot told *The BMJ* that the midwives were expected to wear branded uniforms. “The uniforms had a massive Aptacub logo. We said, ‘We can't wear this.’ The response was, ‘Why can't you?’”

The midwives decided to wear their own clothes and bought blue, unbranded “midwife” lanyards.

In response, Danone said it adhered in the UK to those aspects of the code that were included in domestic law: “We adhere fully to the WHO code as implemented in UK regulations, and this trial is not in breach of that. We provided uniforms and badges as part of the service; however, midwives had the choice to wear their own professional clothing if they preferred. We take all feedback on board as part of the pilot and will explore any areas that need adapting.”

Danone defended the pilot because it gave parents “easy and convenient access to high quality information about nutrition.”

A Tesco spokesperson added that the pilot was intended to offer customers “additional support.” They said, “This complements the professional advice available from our pharmacists in store and adheres fully to the WHO code on breastfeeding as implemented in UK regulations. We comply with the UK regulations governing infant and follow-on formula that cover some parts of the WHO code.”

Advice sessions

The Tesco Extra store's new health consultation rooms host the free infant feeding advice sessions alongside paid-for services, such as a £45 consultation with a clinician on managing menopause symptoms. By booking a session with “Aptacub from Danone” parents can talk to a healthcare professional in private for 30 minutes. The online booking form links to an Aptacub branded page, and Aptacub leaflets are available in the waiting room.

A job advertisement posted in October sought a registered nurse or midwife to deliver consultations

to families on key topics such as “infant feeding and pregnancy” and the “benefits of Danone and Aptaclub.”⁵

Vicky Sibson, director of the charity First Steps Nutrition Trust, which promotes healthy eating in children up to 5 years, said that Danone was using a tried and tested marketing tactic. “They’re not breaking UK laws, but they do break the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes, which clearly advises against marketing personnel seeking direct or indirect contact with pregnant women or mothers. The issue is that UK laws fall short of what they should be. Danone is using its baby club name and logo to promote its service and so indirectly promoting its products,” she told *The BMJ*.

Research shows that such indirect marketing works, said Sibson. “The awareness of that brand in the background and the association with a trained healthcare professional are creating a suggestion that this is a brand to be trusted.”

This brand loyalty contributed to families’ willingness to pay higher prices at the checkout, she added. “Danone’s Aptamil brand is the most expensive product on the market. It’s not fair to parents, particularly in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, that you’ve got all these indirect tactics which are suggesting to parents that if they want to do best for their babies they should buy Aptamil.”

Sibson called on Tesco to end its partnership with Danone. “It’s really inappropriate. It’s not fair to mothers, it’s not ethical,” she said. “What we know is that most women in the UK want to breastfeed in some ways, and this is an example where they undermine women’s self-efficacy to breastfeed. It is at odds with Tesco’s objectives around improving the healthfulness of their retail offer. It is time they took a better look at the baby food aisle.”

Olivia Hinge, a lactation consultant and midwife who was not involved in the Tesco pilot, said that the service made her “feel like we are going backwards.” She asked, “How can this be happening in plain sight? Danone must be thinking ‘this is brilliant,’ and Tesco makes a lot of money out of selling formula milk—it is a booming business.”

Robert Boyle, a consultant paediatric allergist at Imperial College London Healthcare NHS Trust, said that formula milk companies had been behaving this way for more than a century. “They have been dressing midwives up and getting people excited about their formula products in order to pay more for them and use them earlier and longer.

“It created a great scandal in the 1970s as milk nurses went into birthing units and triggered boycotts and demonstrations, which led to the WHO code. What Danone is doing here is clearly against the code.”

Boyle challenged Tesco to keep the clinics “but remove Danone from the picture and allow midwives to use independent NHS information.”

The midwife involved in the pilot said that she had no regrets about walking away from the job. “The bottom line is that we’re making Danone look good—we’re increasing their revenue and product likability, when actually that’s not our role. As midwives we should protect women and advocate for them.”

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2 Competition and Markets Authority. Infant formula and follow-on formula market study interim report. Nov 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infant-formula-and-follow-on-formula-market-study-interim-report>

3 World Health Organization. The international code of marketing of breast-milk substitutes: frequently asked question. 2017 update. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/254911/WHO-NMH-NHD-17.1-eng.pdf>

4 Department of Health and Social Care. Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2016/127 (supplementing Regulation (EU) No 609/2013): guidance. Apr 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infant-and-follow-on-formula-and-food-for-special-medical-purposes/commission-delegated-regulation-eu-2016127-supplementing-regulation-eu-no-6092013-guidance>

5 Paediatric nurse/midwife. Glassdoor. Oct 2024. https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/job-listing/paediatric-nurse-midwife-team-locum-jv_IC2669841_K00,24_KE25,35.htm?jl=1009496726113