

Adjournment Debate

of breast feeding. This practice is carried on not only in the industrial nations but has been effectively practised in the Third World countries.

The practice of using breast milk substitutes in these poverty-stricken countries is fraught with dangers. One such hazard is the lack of sanitary facilities to prepare the formula. The water is frequently contaminated and the utensils used are improperly washed. This leads to high incidence of infection and diarrhea in infants.

Second, the nutritional value of skim milk and skim milk products is much lower than in breast milk. This nutritional value is further depleted by improper dilution of the milk powder used.

Another consideration is the spacing births. A mother who is lactating is less likely to conceive so that breast feeding helps to control the birth rate.

In recent years there has been a rediscovery of the merits of breast feeding with the realization that nature does indeed provide a perfect food for infants and that we should make better use of it. Human milk fat is almost completely absorbed, supplying the necessary energy in a newborn infant even if it is premature. It provides amino acids that are particularly suited to the needs of a newborn and especially of the pre-term infant whose liver is not functioning efficiently. There is a great deal of evidence that the newborn infant can acquire, from breast milk, immunologically protective mechanisms sparing it infections, allergic manifestations and gastroenteritis. Breast feeding has a psychological benefit. The skin to skin contact between mother and infant on breast feeding promotes maternal-infant bonding.

That many of the infants in the Third World are denied the benefits of breast feeding is brought out by some startling statistics that are available. In Chile, deaths were found to be three times as high for infants fed with bottles in the first three months of life as amongst those exclusively breast fed during the same period. A conservative estimate by a university of California researcher estimates some ten million cases of infectious diseases and malnutrition occur each year as a result of artificial feeding in the Third World.

A great deal of the blame for promotion of infant formula feeding is placed on the multinational companies' intense advertising practices in the Third World. The question of whether or not this code should be adopted as a World Health Organization regulation or a non-binding recommendation, was answered by the minister saying that Canada's stand would be that of supporting it as a recommendation.

I am asking for a clarification of this. Why should Canada not take a more positive stand and recommend that regulations, rather than a recommendation be enforced?

● (2225)

Mrs. Ursula Appolloni (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence): Mr. Speaker, I heartily commend

the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Hudecki), for raising this important and vital subject. I can assure him that the Canadian delegation to the World Health Assembly in May will indeed support the adoption of a code on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes.

The hon. member may be aware that the executive board of the World Health Organization, at its meeting in January, decided to recommend that the assembly adopt the proposed code in the form of a recommendation, that is, as a measure which national governments will voluntarily agree to implement on their territory, in the hope that abuses can be corrected through the concerted voluntary action of member states. The general view expressed by the provincial officials in the consultations which the department has had with them is to the effect that a code, adopted as a recommendation, stands a better chance of immediate implementation. Such consultations with the provinces will continue until the question is brought to a vote on the floor of the World Health Assembly and, irrespective of the decision taken, will need to be pursued for a few months, since implementation of the code in Canada will require the co-operation of both levels of government.

The code is proposed as a universal measure intended for developed and developing countries alike. Its early and successful implementation will therefore depend not only upon its receiving the support of the largest number of member states, but also on the extent to which it can be adapted to the specific socio-economic, political and cultural situations operative in each country, including Canada.

Ideally, self-regulation by the industry would be the solution to the problems which the marketing of breastmilk substitutes causes in the developing world. Events over the last few years have established that such an approach is almost Utopian. The World Health Organization therefore proposes that a code governing the production, storage and distribution, as well as the advertising of infant feeding products, be promulgated to protect the health and well-being of all infants in the world.

The resolution before the World Health Assembly also proposes that the implementation of the code be monitored over a two-year period and that the measures required to improve its effectiveness then be reviewed.

As the hon. member knows, the department has been active for years in the promotion of breastfeeding. In the weeks and months ahead, the decision to be made in respect of the implementation of the code in Canada will therefore receive the department's most careful consideration.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Order, please.

The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at two o'clock p.m.

At 10:28 p.m. the House adjourned, without question put, pursuant to Standing Order.