



THE SAGA OF BREASTFEEDING IMAGES

At the end of January a number of emails arrived in the MSCC's inbox about the Health Sponsorship Council's (HSC) plan to use an image of a well known All Black bottle-feeding his baby daughter in one of a number of their "Smoking Not Our Future commercials." The HSC's campaign is a direct-to-youth campaign that uses New Zealand celebrities to deliver pro-smokefree and anti-tobacco messages.

There is some confusion over what happened next. The HSC claims that it is acutely aware of the impact of advertising and is conscious of the need to ensure that, where possible, their work "does not have a detrimental impact on other health messages." Once they identified a potential conflict in health messages, the HSC said they "initiated a process to consider possible alternatives and/or mitigation strategies" and contacted La Leche League, Plunket, the NZ College of Midwives, and several of their service providers involved in the campaign.

Others claim that the HSC approached Ministry of Health officials who could not agree amongst themselves on a response to the use of the image of the bottle-feeding father, and suggested that the HSC consult with the above organisations. Either way, the consultation undertaken by the HSC involved advising La Leche League, Plunket and the NZ College of Midwives of the HSC's plans regarding the Smokefree campaign and the particular commercial under discussion. Most notable was the fact that the letter that the HSC sent out was not actually couched in terms of a consultation process.

On Monday 6 February, both TVOne's *Close Up* and TV 3's *Campbell Live* featured a segment on the issue of the cutting of the image of the bottle-feeding father from the HSC smokefree advertisement. What followed was a flurry of media stories about bottle-feeding that had absolutely nothing to do with the original issues of not producing a commercial with mixed or conflicting health messages and the need to normalise breastfeeding by having lots of breastfeeding images rather than bottle-feeding ones.

For more than a week the *NZ Herald* featured numerous photos of bottle-feeding fathers in its newspaper and on their website. Newspapers and talkback radio took up their own stories and agendas in choosing to concentrate on completely irrelevant issues such as the rights of fathers to bottle-feed their children, whether bottle-feeding mothers were more harassed than breastfeeding mothers when feeding their babies in public, and the rights of parents to choose whether to bottle-feed or breastfeed their infant. Within days the media had totally lost the plot and in doing so focused most of their unnecessarily hostile and vindictive comments on a group whose volunteers provide information and practical support to mothers who want to breastfeed their babies – the La Leche League.

On Sunday 12 February *National Radio's* Mediawatch programme pointed out that the media had gone off the rails in regard to the real issue at stake which was

whether a role model bottle-feeding his baby on an ad on child health could send out a mixed message. The commentator observed that La Leche League, Plunket and the College of Midwives had the right to be worried that such influential images could be seen as an endorsement of bottle-feeding in the context of an ad about keeping children healthy at home. And there was also the issue about the quality of public health messages that are publicly funded. (1)

So while Piri Weepu might go on television vehemently insisting that “I’m not going to let anyone tell me how to raise my kids,” no-one was making any such criticism or telling him how to raise his children. In actual fact it was Piri Weepu who was telling parents what to do – by appearing in a commercial that was advising parents they should not be smoking in their own home!

While La Leche League was bearing the brunt of the blame and criticism, there were other stakeholders who should have been part of defending the sensible and judicious use of tax-payers money when producing public health messages. Both the Ministry of Health and the NZ Breastfeeding Authority were either wishy-washy (the MOH) or entirely absent (the NZBA).

Pat Tuohy, the Ministry of Health’s chief advisor on child and youth health, came out sounding more like an apologist for bottle-feeding. He was quoted in the *Herald on Sunday* as acknowledging that while the evidence shows there are benefits to breastfeeding it’s not the end of the world if they wind up formula-feeding. The NZ Breastfeeding Authority was silent. Neither made any attempt to refocus the media’s attention on the need to avoid sending out mixed messages, especially when using celebrities to endorse important public health messages.

Marewa Glover, a public health researcher and director of the Centre for Tobacco Control Research, was quoted in the *Listener* as saying the bottle-feeding segment of the commercial should have been on the cutting-room floor when the smoke-free advertisement was first edited.

“One of the Health Sponsorship Council’s main strategies is to denormalise smoking – thus the opposite should be a no-brainer for them. If you show a famous and well-respected role model bottle-feeding, then that will contribute to normalising bottle-feeding. We need to normalise breastfeeding,” she said. (2)

Images of high-profile Maori athletes bottle-feeding their children hinder efforts to normalise breastfeeding among the wider Maori community which is significant because Maori women have one of the lowest rates of fully breastfeeding their babies in New Zealand.

References

1. National Radio. www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/20120212
2. Jennifer Bowden. “Best milk.” *Listener*. 3 March 2012.