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## **Book Review**

### *The Politics of Breastfeeding: When Breasts are Bad for Business*

**By Gabrielle Palmer**  
**Pinter & Martin, London, 2009**

**Reviewed by Rosemary Gordon**

This is a fully revised and updated edition of Gabrielle Palmer's 1988 classic, and it is a must for all breastfeeding advocates and supporters who want to understand the many forces – commercial, political and social – which make breastfeeding difficult if not impossible for many women around the world. If you have never read this book, get a copy and be prepared to get angry and motivated. If you have read previous editions, get hold of this new one and reignite your passions!

Twenty years after the first edition the author states: "I wish I were not writing this preface. There should be no need for this book". Yet there patently is as the collusion between the baby food industry and the medical and health care establishments have found new ways to undermine breastfeeding. More scientific knowledge about the benefits of breastfeeding has led to ever more aggressive promotion by baby food and bottle companies. The old 'health nurses,' in reality employees of formula companies placed in maternity and other health facilities to push artificial feeding, have been replaced by telephone help lines and internet websites set up by those same formula companies.

To bring this close to home, while I was reviewing this book, here in New Zealand the formula industry was invited to be part of a video conference on promoting breastfeeding, hosted by our Ministry of Health. The former New Zealand Infant Formula Marketers Association (NZIFMA), a name which at least made it clear who they were, has recently renamed itself the Infant Nutrition Council (which definitely doesn't) and its new website proclaims that it is "Industry supporting both breastfeeding and infant formula." Yeah right! (see <http://infantnutritioncouncil.com>)

As Gabrielle Palmer says: "Much as they urge us to think otherwise, the infant feeding product companies are not philanthropic organisations but competitive commercial enterprises. It is in their interest that women find it difficult to breastfeed."

While much of the original book remains, the author has updated a lot of the original information. You will not be surprised to know that: “The companies did not invent follow on milk because health workers begged them to produce a less-modified milk for older babies. They created these products as a means of promoting all their breast-milk substitutes and to expand their markets; it has been a successful strategy.”

Some of the success stories related in the 1988 edition have been revisited and unfortunately the situation today has deteriorated. For example, Papua New Guinea once made it illegal to sell a bottle without a prescription and bottle-feeding fell to just 12 percent, but then satellite TV beaming in adverts of formula and bottles has brought about an increase in artificial feeding again. Great advances in Brazil have been undermined by the government allowing Nestlé to provide processed food and powdered milk to poor families.

There are several chapters on the WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, which demonstrates the experience of almost three decades; that formula companies will only observe the whole Code if a government makes them do so. This is a lesson that we have still to learn in New Zealand, where the formula industry has been allowed to write its own code of practice. The author’s comments that: “WHO, whose task is to improve world health, and UNICEF, which is concerned with the welfare of children, fell into the role of mediators between pressure groups and the baby food industry, rather than defenders of infant and young child health,” could equally well be applied to our Ministry of Health.

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