Breast or bottle? The decision is not black and white

By ACSH Staff — July 31, 2012

A new mother is faced with many important issues and must make key decisions while still in the fog of post-partum joy and pain, and confusion. One such decision is whether to breastfeed or hit the bottle: infant formula [1].

It has become fairly common knowledge that, from the perspective of baby’s overall health, exclusive breastfeeding [2] for the first six months has the edge over the bottle. Breast milk enhances baby’s immune system, seems to reduce the risk of obesity later on, and often provides a uniquely pleasurable bonding experience for both parent and child.

Nevertheless, new moms are unable or unwilling to devote the rather large amounts of time and effort towards this goal. The reasons why new moms reach for the formula are many, ranging from necessity to purely optional or convenient. There is no wrong answer to this situation: while in recent years, more women are choosing to give breastfeeding a try, not too many years ago bottle-fed babies were the norm and no harm came to them.

The various pressures and concerns of the fateful decision breast or bottle were eloquently and elegantly outlined in a recent column in The New York Times by Jane E. Brody: “The Ideal and the Real of Breast-Feeding.” [3]

Adding to the pressures on women to breastfeed, New York’s Mayor Bloomberg [4] has now taken it upon himself as is his style to attempt to dictate to new mothers what their choice should be. In a cleverly-named campaign, Latch On NYC, he and his cronies in the NYC Department of Health have persuaded a majority of the city’s hospitals to place significant obstacles in the path of those who want to consider feeding their little ones with formula. He has gotten those hospitals maternity areas to lock up formula as though it was morphine, and prevented access to the products unless the reason for the request is documented and the patient, the new mom, first must receive a lecture on the benefits of breastfeeding.

No matter if the woman is well aware of these facts yet chooses to use formula; or if she is unable to breastfeed, as many are; or if she cannot possibly commit to months of breast-pumping due to family conditions or her minimal maternity leave from her job without which baby, mother and family will become impoverished. If they want the formula, they must get the educational lecture. The Mayor says, "I know breast!"

This latest foray into telling New Yorkers what’s good for them is in keeping with the Mayor’s highly aggressive health campaigns some of which have been beneficial (banning smoking almost everywhere), others not likely to be so (banning sodas over 16 ounces). In this instance, one thing will definitely occur: women will feel coerced into making an important decision, under the most confusing and vulnerable circumstances, which may well be not in their best interests, nor those of...
her infant and her family.

Every new baby and its mother are different; all are individuals with different needs and circumstances. To force all into one special box breastfeed only is an egregious intrusion into a highly personal and private issue. My own organization covered this topic recently as well: "Let's go easy on moms who don't breastfeed." [5]

The government has no role to play in this decision, and should mind its own business: governing should be a full-time job, leaving no room for playing surrogate daddy.

Breast or bottle? The decision is not black and white (Examiner) [6]