

New Zealand infants weaned onto a high sugar diet from four months old: better health or better business?

Part II

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Although excess sugar intake is a major cause of ill health,¹⁻⁴ restricting sugary drinks has been the main focus of programmes to improve population health.⁵⁻⁸ Sugary diets can and do start well before sugary drinks are even considered.

In Canada, the US and the UK, researchers, health professionals and health advocates have found that many commercially-prepared baby foods contain unacceptably high concentrations of sugar—with serving sizes that frequently exceed recommended daily allowances. Further, parents and people responsible for public policy tend to overlook this issue.⁹⁻¹²

Recommended intakes of sugar in infants permit no more than 5% of energy, which means less than two teaspoons per day for an average six month old. Even less (<3% of energy) is recommended to prevent dental caries.¹³ Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the New Zealand Ministry of Health (MoH) recommend exclusive breastfeeding for infants up to six months old to achieve optimal growth, development and health.^{14,15} These Guidelines for Healthy Infants and Toddlers both emphasise savoury weaning foods.

We are concerned that infants from four months of age are exposed to foods high in concentrated sugar as their first foods. Some commercial baby foods contain up to four teaspoons of sugar per serve. For example, a 120g pouch of Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's *Apple, Peach and Mango* fruit puree contains 16g of sugar.¹⁶ This equates to four teaspoons of sugar and the package is labelled as a

single serve. On a visit to a local Auckland supermarket, of the 33 single serve Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's baby food products stocked, 22 (66%) exceeded two teaspoons of sugar per serve. Of these, 11 contained two to three teaspoons of sugar, a further 10 items contained three to four teaspoons, and one product contained four teaspoons.

What concerns us is that many of these products, in particular the entire Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's baby food product range, is endorsed by Plunket—the majority health provider for support services for pre-school children. This is confusing and likely to mislead the New Zealand public and parents into thinking these products are healthy food items for their infants.

When Plunket was approached about these concerns, they responded that “Plunket has a 25-year relationship with Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's, and all the Plunket-endorsed products adhered to strict nutrition guidelines”.¹⁷ It was also explained that “the Infant Nutrition Advisory Group (INAG) advises Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's on all issues relating to infant food and nutrition”.¹⁷

It would seem, however, that there is disagreement between the strict nutrition guidelines adhered to by Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's and those prescribed by the WHO and New Zealand MoH.^{14,15}

The INAG is described as “an independent group of New Zealand's foremost experts in child health and nutrition”¹⁸ that give advice to Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's about food and nutrition. After further enquiry, we found that the INAG consists of three members: a

Plunket representative and two independent dietitians.¹⁹ A number of concerns we have about the INAG include:

- Lack of transparency of membership of the group (not listed on any public website and not available on request)
- Lack of publicly available reports or minutes
- The claim that the group is independent, which is untrue as at least two members receive an honorarium for their services to the INAG from Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's,¹⁹ and the Plunket member has an interest with Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's because Plunket receives their funding
- This group is 'advisory' only: Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's can reject advice
- INAG provides advice to Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's rather than to Plunket.

Further, we believe that the advice this group provides should align with WHO guidance about sugar intake, and scientific evidence relating to the risk of dental caries, as well as MoH guidelines.¹³⁻¹⁵

From our investigation, we cannot determine whether the i) INAG have provided advice that has supported baby foods with concentrated sugar to be produced and marketed as healthy **OR** ii) whether INAG have determined that these products are unhealthy, yet their advice was ignored by the manufacturers.

Regardless of which statement is true, high-sugar baby foods feature prominently on our supermarket shelves of which the entire Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's range carry the Plunket logo endorsing their product.

Plunket receive sponsorship funds for their endorsement of the Kraft-Heinz-Wattie's range of infant and baby-foods. Plunket provides vital health care to the community and funding is needed to support this, but is this commercial relationship likely to result in best practice from a public health nutrition perspective, or is it another form of marketing?

Considering these points, we suggest that:

1. Plunket re-assess which baby-foods they endorse, paying attention to concentrated sugar content.
2. The New Zealand MoH establish an Infant Nutrition Advisory Group and prepare guidance about the composition of baby foods.
3. Sugary 'baby foods' that exceed 5g/100g or 8g per serve be subject to health warnings, and are not endorsed by health agencies.
4. The New Zealand government adequately fund Plunket, so that their work is not influenced by the food industry.

Finally, we propose that these sugary baby foods be removed from supermarket shelves, or at least Plunket remove their endorsement from these products until a comprehensive assessment of the issues raised in this letter is completed.

This paper has been prepared by FIZZ (Fighting Sugar in Soft drinks) New Zealand; a public health advocacy group established by researchers that aims to address child and adult obesity by reducing sugar intake and specifically sugary drink consumption to zero by 2025.

Competing interests:

Nil.

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