Codex Alimentarius Commission's 31st session, Geneva June 30-July 4 2008

The resolution WHA 58.32 adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2005 called upon Codex to urgently complete the work under way to revise the Code of Hygienic Practice for Foods for Infants and Young Children: http://www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA58/WHA58_32-en.pdf

This Codex Code of Hygienic Practice dates from 1979, and thus from the time before *Enterobacter sakazakii* was identified as a distinct species of harmful bacteria. Powdered formulas are not commercially sterile products and as from 2000, the number of documented recalls of powdered formulas contaminated by bacteria increased the urgency of the need for revision of the 1979 Codex Code. Because of this critical situation and the vulnerability of infants to disease caused by these pathogenic bacteria, the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene accelerated the review process and completed the new draft by 2008 instead of by 2010.

In July 2008, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) accordingly reviewed and adopted the new Code of Hygienic Practice for Powdered Formulae for Infants and Young Children. Powdered formulae include infant formulae and formulae for special medical purposes, and human milk fortifiers used to supplement breastmilk. Follow-up formulae are also included in the scope and WHO is convening an expert meeting in July 2008. Pending the outcome of this meeting, the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene will decide either to apply the same microbiological criteria to follow-on formula as to infant formula, or to draft special microbiological criteria for follow-up formulas that will be less stringent, according to the proposal by the European Union: http://www.who.int/foodsafety/micro/jemra/meetings/formula/en/index.html

The revised Codex Code of Hygienic Practice now includes a section on Product Information and Labeling:

"***The label should include information to make clear the potential risks of inappropriate preparation, handling, and because powdered formula is not sterile and because failure to follow manufacturers´ instructions may cause serious illness ..... The label should also include information that can enable consumers to easily identify products in case of a recall***".

This wording is vague but it can still be used at national level to advocate for government action to provide warning notices on product labels, in accordance with the much clearer text in the ***WHO Guidelines on safe preparation, storage and handling of powdered infant formula***http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/micro/pif2007/en/

Powdered infant formula is not sterile. It may contain bacteria that can cause serious illness in infants. Correct preparation reduces the risk of illness.

However, it must be borne in mind that the primary responsibility of reducing risk and providing safe products rests with the manufacturers of powdered formulae. The industry is trying to shift responsibility to the product user, but in that case, then parents and caregivers must have access to clear and consistent information on product labels and packaging.

During this 31st session of the CAC, the representative of WHO referred specifically to provision of the new WHA resolution 61.20 regarding investigation of the use of human donor milk as a potential risk reduction strategy. This underscores the importance of protecting, promoting and supporting early and exclusive breastfeeding in order to safeguard the health of babies against the hazards of artificial feeding products.