

July 9, 2018

The Honorable Alex Azar  
Secretary of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

On behalf of the members of the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health, and the students, faculty and leadership of America's public health schools and programs, I write to express our disappointment and dismay at the United States' efforts to block a resolution offered at the World Health Assembly that called on all governments to "protect, promote and support breast-feeding." We ask that you clarify the United States' position on breastfeeding, including why we apparently now are opposed to its promotion and why the United States also now apparently is opposing efforts to limit the inaccurate or misleading marketing of breast milk substitutes. Lastly, since you led the U.S. delegation to the World Health Assembly, we ask you to explicitly state who approved this radical change in U.S. policy.

The research on the benefits of breastfeeding is clear. Moreover, U.S. policy promoting breastfeeding – up until now – also has been clear and grounded in science. The 2011 Surgeon General's *Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding*<sup>1</sup> reviewed the relevant research and unequivocally found that "Breast milk is uniquely suited to the human infant's nutritional needs and is a live substance with unparalleled immunological and anti-inflammatory properties that protect against a host of illnesses and diseases for both mothers and children." The report also concluded: "One of the most highly effective preventive measures a mother can take to protect the health of her infant and herself is to breastfeed." That research finding doesn't just apply to U.S. children. The Surgeon General's Call to Action also said, "Given the importance of breastfeeding for the health and well-being of mothers and children, it is critical that we take action across the country to support breastfeeding." While the Surgeon General's report and its 20 recommendations were aimed at increasing the number of babies in the U.S. who are breast fed, the conclusions have, until now, shaped both US and foreign policy on breastfeeding.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding*. Washington, DC: DHHS Office of the Surgeon General; 2011.

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Moreover, while we focus primarily on the benefits of breastfeeding, the potential harms associated with formula should not be overlooked and were noted in the 2011 report. “In 2007, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) published a summary of systematic reviews and meta-analyses on breastfeeding and maternal and infant health outcomes in developed countries. The AHRQ report<sup>2</sup> reaffirmed the health risks associated with formula feeding and early weaning from breastfeeding. With regard to short-term risks, formula feeding is associated with increases in common childhood infections, such as diarrhea<sup>3</sup> and ear infections<sup>4</sup>. The risk of acute ear infection, also called acute otitis media, is 100 percent higher among exclusively formula-fed infants than in those who are exclusively breastfed during the first six months.” The Surgeon General’s call built on the 2000 *HHS Blueprint for Action on Breastfeeding*<sup>5</sup>, finding of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force<sup>6</sup> (USPSTF), and the Healthy People 2010<sup>7</sup> and 2020<sup>8</sup> reports.

Since the first reports, U.S. Surgeon General’s reports have been non-partisan summaries of evidence and policy and the recommendations contained therein have had huge influence in the U.S. and around the world. We have been lauded for our willingness to look beyond politics to determine what is appropriate and optimal to enhance the public’s health. We call upon you, as a leader at the highest levels of government, to take the ethical step of standing up for the health of mothers and babies across the U.S. and around the world. They need your leadership and your stalwart defense of evidence and their health far more than companies that market infant formula need your help in selling their products.

The leadership of the United States on public health matters is being questioned by our allies and others. Actions such as what happened at the World Health Assembly on the

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<sup>2</sup> Ip S, Chung M, Raman G, Chew P, Magula N, DeVine D, et al. Breastfeeding and maternal and infant health outcomes in developed countries: evidence report/technology assessment no 153. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; 2007. AHRQ Publication No 07-E007.

<sup>3</sup> Chien PF, Howie PW. Breast milk and the risk of opportunistic infection in infancy in industrialized and non-industrialized settings. *Adv Nutr Res.* 2001;10:69–104.

<sup>4</sup> Ip S, Chung, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Blueprint for Action on Breastfeeding.* Washington, DC: DHHS Office of Women’s Health; 2000.

<sup>6</sup> US Preventive Services Task Force. Primary care interventions to support breastfeeding: US Preventive Services Task Force recommendation statement. *JAMA.* doi:10.1001/jama.2016.14697

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy People 2010.* Washington, DC: DHHS Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; 2000.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy People 2020.* Washington, DC: DHHS Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; 2010.

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breastfeeding resolution represent a repudiation of established research, the unilateral abrogation of standing U.S. policy, and a waste of political capital in what appears to be an effort to curry favor with commercial interests. It is at times like these that we look to our leaders to provide the courage and the wisdom to do the right thing. Children represent our future and it is in everyone's political, commercial and societal best interest to assure their healthy growth and development. Breastfeeding remains one of the most effective ways to ensure child health, survival and development.

Sincerely,



Donna J. Petersen, MHS, ScD, CPH  
Chair, ASPPH Board of Directors  
and Dean, University of South Florida  
College of Public Health



Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH  
Chair-Elect, ASPPH Board of Directors  
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Cc: Assistant Secretary for Health Dr. Brett Giroir  
Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams  
CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield