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## The wrong formula

Scientists trying to 'improve' formula milk for babies. But breast milk already has the right ingredients.

April 23, 2007 6:55 PM | [Printable version](#)

News that scientists are working on a [new formula milk](#) that could prevent children becoming obese has hit the headlines big time, with lots of space given to it in various national newspapers.

But the real story - or the real scandal - lies buried towards the end of the piece in most of the papers I've read. Because, yes, there is indeed research going on at Buckingham University into how to enrich formula milk with [leptin](#), a hormone that seems to "educate" a baby's appetite, so he or she will be less likely to over-eat later in life. But - and this is the really exciting thing, though we've actually known it for a while - breast milk contains leptin too - and in a form babies can absorb easily.

So, the question is: why are we spending money on trying to develop an inferior substitute, rather than putting more resources into encouraging mothers to breastfeed?

The answer is partly commercial: encouraging breastfeeding doesn't push up company profits. Not so bottle-feeding: it's notoriously difficult to find out how profitable formula milk sales are to the big food manufacturers that make it, but profitable it undoubtedly is (would they be making it, otherwise?). Quite how Buckingham University's research is being funded is shrouded in secrecy - their press office reports that it's backed by "a private medical charity that wishes to remain anonymous".

Tragically, the amount of money spent on promoting formula milk - and it can still be promoted, albeit in more subtle ways than used to be the case before the World Health Organisation [weighed in](#) with a code of practice on the issue - dwarfs the amount of money the government spends on promoting breastfeeding. And there's certainly promotion needed: the number of mothers who begin to breastfeed after their baby's birth is around 76% - but a fifth of those stop in the first fortnight, and 36% give up within six weeks. By six months, only 20% of babies are getting any breastmilk at all - despite the Department of Health's own advice that babies should be fed **only** breast milk, with no other milk or food at all, until six months.

So there's clearly plenty of potential for government investment (particularly since nine in 10 mothers who stop breastfeeding early on say they wish they had continued). Formula milk companies invest money in formula milk because it makes money: why can't the British government see that investing money in promoting and supporting breastfeeding is going to enrich all of us - making us healthier, and costing our health service less - and for generations to come?

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