

Controversial Breast-Feeding Ads Getting Results

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
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BOSTON — A controversial ad campaign aimed at encouraging women to breast-feed has increased awareness of the importance of breast-feeding and how long to do it, according to data presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association.

About 68% of women surveyed after the campaign said that the best way to feed a baby is through breast-feeding, compared with 51% polled before the campaign was launched, according to the results of a tracking survey.

Anne Merewood, director of the Breast-feeding Center at Boston Medical Center,

The controversial television ads featured women far along in their pregnancies who engaged in risky activities such as log-rolling and riding a mechanical bull.

outlined the findings of the tracking survey. The survey examines whether attitudes about breast-feeding changed after the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign was launched in June 2004. Ms. Merewood was the director of the Boston-area community demonstration project, 1 of 16 community-based projects around the country that partnered with the federal government to implement the campaign at the local level.

The national campaign included television, radio, and print advertisements. The controversial television ads featured women who were far along in their pregnancies engaging in risky activities such as log rolling and riding a mechanical bull. The ad said: "You wouldn't take risks before your baby's born. Why start after?" It also stated that babies who are breast-fed are less likely to develop ear infections, respiratory illnesses, and diarrhea.

The goal of the campaign was to increase the proportion of mothers who breast-feed their babies during the early postpartum period from 69% to 75%, and from 33% to 50% after 6 months, by the year 2010. The campaign was funded by the Office of Women's Health, part of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Ad Council, which produced the campaign, conducted a tracking survey of 70 women aged 18-34 years from April 18 to May 15, 2004, before the launch of the ads. Officials at the Ad Council also conducted a postcampaign survey of 606 women aged 18-34 years from Sept. 9 to Sept. 22, 2005.

The two surveys show that following the national campaign, more women agreed that breast-feeding is the best way to feed a baby and fewer women endorsed formula only or a combination of formula and breast-feeding as the best method.

The number of women who said that breast-feeding and formula were equivalent dropped from 29% to 20%. The pro-

portion of women who favored a mix of breast-feeding and formula also dropped. In 2004, 16% said a combination of breast-feeding and formula was the best approach, compared with 8% in 2005.

Only a small percentage of women—4%—said that formula was the best way to feed a baby in 2004, and that figure dropped even lower in 2005 to 2%.

The Ad Council survey also polled women on what they thought was the recommended number of months to exclu-

sively breast-feed. In 2005, 36% of women responded that exclusive breast-feeding for 6 months was recommended, compared with 26% of women in 2004.

However, there also were some contradictions in the survey data. While only 2% of women in 2005 cited formula as the best way to feed a baby, during that same time period 32% of women also stated that infant formula is just as good as breast milk. This figure is down from 50% the previous year.

"We're seeing in the data here that women think breast-feeding is better, but don't think that formula feeding is worse," Ms. Merewood said.

Some of this disconnect may be due to the fact that women recognize the benefits of breast-feeding, but see in their own personal experiences that formula feeding didn't harm their children, Ms. Merewood said. This is a different point of view than the population-wide perspective that formula feeding carries risks, she said. ■

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