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Infantile Overnutrition

SIR,—I had really been wondering when the highly profitable infant food industry would start the counter-attack in relation to the increasing evidence that the current unbiological system of infant feeding in the western world—that is, artificial feeding with cow's milk formulas (with volumes and concentration under the mother's control) and with the ever-earlier introduction of semisolids—leads to overweight and ultimately to over-fatness (obesity) in infancy.

I would not disagree with the comments of Drs. R. A. Stewart and G. A. Purvis of Gerber Products Co. (24 March, p. 738) that differences in activity, food absorption capacity, and metabolism undoubtedly account for some variability in body composition and nutrient needs. At the same time, the hypernutrition of infants as a result of the present vogue for what may perhaps be termed "double feeding"—that is, the cow's milk formula plus early semisolids—rather than the previous transitional weaning process can only be expected to result in obese babies as inevitably as the overstuffed goose results in *pâté de foie*.

A recent scan of paediatric textbooks from 1896 to the present has clearly indicated that there has been a decreasing age at which the introduction of semisolids has been suggested by paediatric authorities. At the beginning of the present century this was at the end of the first year of life. Very

recently various theoretical ages have been suggested, such as 2-4 months. However, practice by mothers has usually shown a still earlier age than recommended by the books and is now often in the first weeks. Reasons for this are considered elsewhere.¹ They certainly include the fact that, while the cultural body-image of adults has changed from Rubens to Twiggy in the last few hundred years, the plump or even fat baby is still as much a part of most western cultures, perhaps some more than others, as was the case in painting of mediaeval infant Christs and/or cherubim.

It would seem that, for various reasons, the paediatrician has tended to abrogate his authority, and perhaps his knowledge, with regard to the details of infant nutrition, largely because of the lack of training in nutrition in most medical schools in Europe and North America. Undoubtedly, the present-day infant feeding is largely under the direction of mothers themselves, with understandable "ancestral anxieties" concerning underweight, exacerbated by present-day competitiveness in Western "achievement-orientated societies." There also seems little doubt that a prime mover into the vacuum left by the nutritionally ill-prepared paediatrician is the commercial infant food industry. It is, of course, readily apparent that it is not only possible to extend a market geographically, but also to extend it "downwards" to involve

infants of younger age than previously.

Certainly rationalizations for this can be given and have been given for this trend, such as "widening the baby's taste preferences" and introducing iron into the diet earlier. None of these have any real or proved usefulness. On the contrary, the recent paper by Dr. Annapurna Shukla and others (2 December, p. 507), combined with a recent personal search through large numbers of papers from the medical literature as far afield as Japan, seems to indicate rather conclusively that the problem of overstuffing, calorically overdosed, obese babies is becoming a real, unnecessary, and avoidable public health problem of immediate concern in infancy and with long-lasting ill effects.

Certainly various factors are concerned, but recent experience with any aspect of commerce, including, for example, the great and prolonged "percentage-of-added-fat-in-peanut-butter" struggle, indicates very clearly that it is a fact of life that industrial concerns in the free-market consumer societies in the western world are geared to profit before anything else. This applies as much to infant food concerns as to cigarette manufacturers.—I am, etc.,

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¹ Jelliffe, D. B., and Jelliffe, E. F. P., *Fat Babies: Prevalence, Perils and Prevention*. In press.