**SCMP Article**

**Building a more baby-friendly Hong Kong**

The government announced an important step in making Hong Kong a friendlier place for nursing mothers – and for hungry babies – in late June. The measure involves changing the land sale conditions for commercial and retail sites. The new conditions require developers to include lactation and baby care facilities in new offices, malls, food outlets and similar locations. The government will adopt similar requirements for its own premises.

Officials in health, buildings and other areas will work out the details of the new requirements, but essentially it will be mandatory for office developments to include lactation rooms for staff who work in the building. Retail and eating premises will have to include baby care facilities for staff and customers.

These new requirements come in response to growing public demand for a more supportive environment for breastfeeding in Hong Kong. Ideally, babies should be mainly breastfed for at least the first six months or longer, as both my sons were. Mother’s milk is optimal for babies in terms of nutrition and building up the baby’s immunity, and there are health benefits for breastfeeding mothers, too.

One major barrier is that when women return to work after having a baby, breastfeeding becomes more of a challenge because they need time and space to express milk to use later. It is easy to see why mothers often find it more practical to use formula.

The new rules only affect new developments. What about existing premises? Looking around my own company’s offices, it seems a real challenge to find space. But more companies are managing to free up a small comfortable room with a seat, power socket and refrigeration. Some keep a conference room free at set times for mothers to pump milk. Websites for mothers list quite a few hotels, malls and retailers – and government locations – offering such facilities. Just as important, forward-looking employers allow breaks for lactating mums at work. Another problem is attitudes towards breastfeeding in public areas. Nursing mothers have complained for years about discrimination – but are fighting back. Some have organised mass feed-ins in malls to get out the message. The government and Equal Opportunities Commission support legislation barring discrimination against nursing mothers.

Many government policies seem to create controversy. But the government’s plans to require baby care and lactation space in new commercial premises are not likely to run into opposition. The new rules affect developers, but no more than previous reforms to building regulations on things like barrier-free access for people with disabilities. Similarly, property management companies will take on some extra responsibilities – but nothing they can’t handle. Breastfeeding activists, the health care profession and mothers will obviously welcome these new measures.

One sector that might not be so happy is the manufacturers of formula. The milk powder industry has been blamed for the decline in breastfeeding in many parts of the world. Critics say the industry has used free samples, advertising and other methods to convince women to abandon breastfeeding and use more expensive, less natural formula.

Hong Kong this year launched a voluntary code on marketing milk formula. The code is quite detailed on labelling, product promotion and advertising that discourages breastfeeding – but not everyone is convinced it is tough enough. As many parents know, however, formula is incredibly useful. Not only is it convenient when travelling, for example, but it has played a role in enabling women to have babies and maintain their careers. The idea is not to banish formula, but to not deprive women of the opportunity to give their babies mainly mother’s milk.

Hong Kong has some way to go. Scandinavian countries outperform most developed economies in encouraging breastfeeding, and Japan is ahead in providing nursing rooms in rail stations, parks, department stores and other public places. But the new land sales conditions show we are moving ahead.

The ultimate driving force here has been mothers themselves. If they keep campaigning, we will see more steps towards a more baby-friendly Hong Kong.