

Nestle under scanner for clinical trials in India

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The Union Health Ministry has asked the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to probe into the allegations against the Indian arm of Swiss food giant, Nestle, for allegedly sponsoring research in five Indian hospitals in violation of a law that protects and promotes breastfeeding.

The move followed after an NGO Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), wrote to the Ministry complaining that the Nestle had violated the infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles and infant foods act, also known as the IMS Act which prohibits direct and indirect sponsorship of health workers by product manufacturers.

Nestle, however, has denied the allegations stating that the trials were being conducted after following all the norms.

In a letter dated August 2, Health Secretary Preeti Sudan instructed ICMR director general Balram Bhargava to “ensure that all trials in future are screened for any infringement of IMS Act”. ThePrint has seen a copy of the letter.

The IMS Act bars financial inducements, pecuniary benefit, and funding of seminars, educational courses, contests, fellowships or research for health workers by companies manufacturing baby products listed under the IMS Act.

According to the BPNI complaint, Nestle India Ltd is listed as the primary sponsor and source of monetary or material support to five hospitals conducting the research titled “Multicentric Observational Study to Observe Growth in Preterm hospitalized infants”.

The leading manufacturer of infant milk substitutes and infant foods has been found to sponsor research in hospitals namely Cloudnine Hospital, Bengaluru, Institute of Child Health, Kolkata, Manipal Hospital, Bengaluru, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital New Delhi, and Calcutta Medical Research Institute, Kolkata, as per the BPNI.

“On examining the ICMR Clinical Trial Registry maintained by the ICMR, BPNI confirmed that Nestle India Limited, a producer of infant milk substitutes and infant foods, is sponsoring research,” said the BPNI letter.

However, the Nestle spokesperson said that “Clinical study for the purpose of scientific information is not prohibited under the IMS Act. The IMS Act does not discourage or prohibit dissemination of scientific information.”

In a statement, the spokesperson said the objective of the clinical study was to encourage science-based research and all Institutional Ethics Committee approvals had been obtained from the participating sites.