

Rebecca Walsh: For Leavitt, it's business before babies

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Mike Leavitt is a loving father and grandfather.

But don't worry. That won't change how he does his job as boss man at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

There are other considerations that are more important to Utah's former governor - like the nexus between formula factories, pharmaceutical companies/lobbyists and the coffers of the Republican Party. Those will win out over true family values every time.

More than four months ago, Leavitt's department completed a study that found - yet again - that breastfeeding lowers rates of childhood diabetes, leukemia, obesity, asthma and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

You probably haven't heard about it. HHS political appointees - Leavitt is No. 1 - actively suppressed publicity for the report. After the analysis by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality came out, HHS staff members were told not to issue a news release, according to *The Washington Post*.

The lead science adviser for the department's Office on Women's Health was told there should be "no media outreach to anyone." A spokesman for the department acknowledged taking "heat from the formula industry." A few e-mail notices later, the analysis disappeared - until Democrats in Congress ordered an investigation.

I'm sure this is all one big misunderstanding. A father of five couldn't really be trying to roundfile studies that show the indisputable health benefits of breastfeeding, could he?

I tried to ask the man himself. He's on a gee-whiz tour of Africa - blogging all the way. So, I submitted a comment to the secretary's blog, asking if he had anything to do with quashing the analysis.

No response.

All comments are approved by the secretary himself, and mine hasn't appeared yet. Coincidentally, Leavitt's last blog was the day the story of the HHS breastfeeding cover-up broke.

This isn't the first time the companies who make formula have made U.S. health policy conform not to nature and science but to their corporate interests. A few years ago, an HHS breast-feeding ad campaign was hijacked by the formula lobby. Pictures of nipple-tipped insulin bottles were replaced by two scoops of ice cream with cherries on top. Scary warnings like "Babies who aren't breastfed are 40 percent more likely to suffer Type 1 diabetes" were changed to softer helpful hints: "Breastfeed for six months. You may help reduce your child's risk for childhood obesity."

"It's all very fluffy," says Kathy Pope, marketing chairwoman for the Utah Breastfeeding Coalition.

Former HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson was at the helm then. But Leavitt - once the nominal leader of the family-friendliest state in the union -

apparently hasn't done much to change the business-first culture in his department.

Meantime, fewer American mothers are breastfeeding. In 2002, according to the Ross Mothers Survey, 33 percent of women breastfed their babies after six months. Four years later, that number dropped to 30 percent.

I cried the day my 10-month-old son refused to nurse. But I'm in the minority. Breastfeeding isn't always easy. Work isn't conducive to hourly feedings. Pumps are expensive. Formula is right there on the shelf next to diapers. Intimidated by politicians, government scientists aren't giving women the information they need - with suitably alarming language - to encourage what nature intended.

And despite their reputation, Utahns don't always support nursing mothers. Last month, a Wyoming woman was escorted from an Ogden craft store after customers complained she was nursing her child with an exposed breast. If you can't nurse at the Quilted Bear - with all those afghans and throws around - where can you?

"We are so conditioned to make women feel guilty for breastfeeding," says Pope. "We have to move past it."

Just don't expect any help from Mike. He's busy marveling about malaria medicine and traffic accidents in Tanzania.

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