As we go to press with this issue, Americans are wondering and worrying about the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that began last year. The media hype around this issue is alarming. But I’ve yet to see any front-page headlines or any news channel pundits addressing a decades-old threat that is much closer to home: The weapons of mass production.

Formula is mass-produced in modern factories, and we presume that results in uniformity and consistency. Somehow, we’ve concluded that such presumed uniformity and consistency is a proxy for safety. Well, my dears, such is not the case.

New processing techniques in the 1950s led to a destruction of B vitamins and subsequent convulsions, cerebral palsy and retardation in children. In 1979, chloride-deficient formulas resulted in serious health consequences for over 100 infants. Did Walter Cronkite tell you either of these stories?

The 1979 chloride problem provided the impetus for the Infant Formula Act of 1980 in which the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) specified that infant formula must contain minimum amounts of 29 nutrients and maximum amounts for 9 of those nutrients. The Infant Formula Act of 1980 or its amendments in 1986 didn’t prevent future problems.

By my count, there have been 33 recalls of infant formula products since 1982. (Your count may differ, depending on how you define a formula product and a recall.) About one-third of recalls in the past 22 years have been Class I recalls, i.e., life-threatening. Formula has been recalled for many reasons. Nutrient deficiencies, pathogen contamination and mislabeling are the biggies, but formula has been recalled for chlorine contamination, peeling of the can’s liner, bulging cans, you name it, it’s had it. (Visit www.naba-breastfeeding.org for a complete list of recalls.) A few deserve special mention.

1993, the FDA recalled 102,048 bottles of Nutramigen because they contained glass particles. In 1999, 7,000 cases labeled Portagen contaminated with Enterbacter sakazakii. In 1993, the FDA recalled 102,048 bottles of Nutramigen because they contained glass particles. In 1999, 7,000 cases labeled Portagen contaminated with Enterbacter sakazakii.1 Was that as a headline on the front page of your newspaper?

Recalls occur only when there is some gross error in the quality-control. But don’t you dare for one moment assume that all of the formula products on the shelves have that uniformity and consistency of vitamins and minerals that we expect. Holick et al4 randomly selected samples 5 different brands of formula on shelves in New England and analyzed them for vitamin D content. Nearly three-quarters of the samples contained more than 200% of the amount of Vitamin D stated; one sample contained 419% of the amount of vitamin D stated on the label. Similarly, wide variations in trace minerals have been found in infant formula samples.5 Ten percent of the 133 formula samples given to WIC clients had nutrient concentrations that deviated at least 10% from the norm; 11% of the sample deviated by 17% of what they were supposed to be.6

Toxic levels of lead in formula has been attributed to home tap water7 and two of a manufacturer’s water wells were contaminated with harmful chemicals. (Food and Chemical News, 1983.) One soy formula had from 15 to 463 times more aluminum than that which is in human milk.8 Two infants died of aluminum toxicity; formula was the source of the problem.9 In the past 2 years, millions of cans of formula have been recalled because of suspected Enterbacter sakazakii contamination. Kandhai and colleagues tried to explain why. They found that 8 of 9 food factories and 5 of 16 households contained Enterbacter sakazakii.10 Was that as a headline on the front page of your newspaper?

Recently a counterfeit formula showed up; it resembled Similac, but a few parents noticed that the enclosed scoop looked different.11 Although no infant was harmed, this should have splattered all over the mainstream media, or at least in the tabloids. But did you see it? I didn’t.

If the media finds out about one breastfeeding mother whose child dies, it makes the news headlines and the prime time dramas—big time. But the ongoing morbidity and mortality of formula fed children is almost completely ignored.