

Growth disorders reopen soy debate



Some scientists are convinced that estrogens in soy infant formula can have long-term ill effects.

SARAH, now 18, was breast-fed for the first five weeks of her life. At 11 weeks, mother's milk was supplemented with soy formula, which Sarah continued to drink until she was 5.

Sarah's childhood was not an easy ride. At 18 months she broke her femur. She was troubled by eczema and asthma.

More puzzling was the way Sarah's face developed an abnormal flush at about six months. Later dark rings formed under her eyes.

Sarah's parents took comfort from their daughter's growth rate, which was just fine. But at 12 Sarah suddenly stopped growing — except for her breasts. She is now seeking breast-reduction surgery.

Sarah's bones sometimes ache and are easily dislocated. She has had abnormal hair growth, and recently hair loss.

Sarah's periods have never been regular and she has endured prolonged bleeding. She is under specialist medical care, but doc-

Parents who fed their babies soy formula are asking questions about growth problems the children are now suffering. CAMILLE GUY finds they hope a nutrition conference in Auckland next week will provide some answers.

tors can offer no satisfactory explanation for Sarah's disorders.

Sarah's mother felt driven to tell her daughter's story when she read a *New Zealand Herald* feature article in June on natural toxins in soybeans. We reported that four New Zealand scientists have persistently urged our Ministry of Health to stop general sales of soy infant formula.

Professor Cliff Irvine, Dr Mike Fitzpatrick, Dr David Woodhams and Dr Iain Robertson all believe scientific understandings about the toxins, particularly the phytoestrogens (isoflavones), found in soy products, and especially in soy infant formula, indicate possible long-term ill-effects.

But the ministry is reluctant to act until "researchers give us a more definitive steer." And the soy industry continues to express confidence in its products. In the *Herald* article Dr Gregory Rough of the Wyeth pharmaceutical company said that babies had used soy formula for 25 years without adverse reports.

The comment prompted several *Herald* readers to offer their own stories. They say they fed their babies soy formula, back in the days when that was unusual — one couple even importing the product by the case-load because it was not locally available.

Those soy-fed children are now teens or adults, and their parents

voice concerns about their development. Those with sons report hyperactivity, learning difficulties, limited concentration and genital abnormalities. One mother says her son became extremely self-conscious about his pointed nipples.

Parents with daughters speak of arrested development, learning difficulties, delayed puberty, bleeding disorders, ovary disorders, and difficulties with brittle bones, yellowed teeth and retention of baby teeth. One woman developed one breast two years before the second grew.