International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)

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Agenda Item 5.5. Universal Health Coverage

As one of WHO's longest-standing public interest partners IBFAN strongly supports the principle of publicly funded UHC and welcomes WHO's acknowledgement that primary health care is an essential component.

However, that so little attention is paid to the need for conflict of Interest safeguards is worrying. WHO's keenness to involve the corporations and fear of being seen as 'risk averse' now seems more evident than concern about being seen as cavalier, even negligent.

Of course WHO cannot police what happens at country level, however it does have an obligation to warn Member States of the risks of inappropriate commercial involvement in health care delivery. If it doesn't the public might surely question its independence, integrity and trustworthiness.

There are countless examples of patient safety and health being harmed because of such involvement.   To take just one - baby food company phone apps that advise mothers how to feed their babies. Surely WHO would not want to WHO to seen as endorsing such things.

No one wants to hold back innovation that can genuinely advance health, but corporations do not have a monopoly on innovative ideas. One thing is sure, unless interventions are carefully screened and monitored by truly independent bodies, the risks to health and increased costs of services can be large and counterproductive to public health goals.

If corporations are involved in monitoring and reporting – as they might be in a Public Private Partnership - the benefits of the interventions are likely to be promoted above the risks. Companies are trusted to help with health care planning, given access to personal data and everything else they need to expand markets.

Meanwhile the publicly funded health care systems that exist in many countries are under attack.

This is a slippery slope that needs to be navigated very carefully and WHO has a key role to play in getting it right. Thank you.