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# Formula milk: WHO Foundation refuses to take further financial donations from Nestlé

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A foundation set up by the World Health Organization will no longer accept money from Nestlé, the world's largest formula milk company, after a multi-million dollar donation made last year, *The BMJ* can report.

The WHO Foundation received \$2.2m (£1.97m; €2.26m) from Nestlé in 2021 that was originally intended for the Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund, a WHO fund to support its response to the pandemic. News of the contribution caused an internal furore at WHO, and the WHO Foundation told *The BMJ* that as a result of this “feedback” it had redirected the money to the Go Give One vaccine campaign, which funded the procurement of covid-19 vaccines by Covax.

Since then the foundation has published a “gift acceptance policy” and strengthened its “related processes,” a spokesperson said. In future, the WHO Foundation will receive contributions only from companies that do not compromise “WHO’s integrity, independence, credibility, and reputation.”

The WHO Foundation is not accepting contributions from companies that are not in compliance with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, it said, confirming that this included Nestlé.

Commenting on the move, Laurence Grummer-Strawn of WHO's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development said that WHO was "very upset" on discovering the contribution and had demanded that the foundation return the money.

"The WHO Foundation was established to be distinct from WHO, to give it more flexibility to receive funding from the private sector, to not be constrained by the same bureaucratic constraints that we have," he said. "When we found out about this, the WHO was very upset and said, 'This can't happen. You have to reverse this now.' And we discovered we had no legal way of forcing [the foundation] to turn the money back or to change their policies.

"Since then, we have had discussions to say we can't legally force you, but you realise you are using the WHO name and you are doing something that is in violation of the World Health Assembly. And they said, OK, we won't do that again. So we've corrected it, but we didn't correct it fast enough that they were willing to turn the money back and say, 'We made a big mistake.' We're left with this mark against us."

## **Complexity of funding**

Grummer-Strawn, who was speaking at a WHO/BMJ webinar on conflicts of interest with the breastmilk substitutes industry, said that it was a measure of the complexity of funding that even WHO "got stuck in the same situation" that it warned others against.

Robert Boyle, clinical reader in paediatric allergy at the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, said that the WHO Foundation had made a "significant error of judgment" in accepting the money in the first place.

"The donation potentially allows Nestlé, the world's largest formula company, to present themselves as WHO partners, which confuses public health messaging about the importance of limiting formula marketing," said Boyle. "The donation also potentially hampers WHO's attempts to ensure professional societies do not accept sponsorship from formula companies, since WHO can be viewed as having accepted funding from a formula company themselves.

"It is good to hear that WHO Foundation have recognised this issue and, going forwards, have committed to not accept donations from formula companies that fail to comply with the International Code."

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