



International news

World Health Assembly '94: Global consensus on Code as industry is defeated

After 13 years of opposition, the USA has joined the rest of the world in an historic consensus decision to support the International Code. A resolution condemning company donations of baby milk to all parts of the health care system worldwide followed a heated three-day debate at the World Health Assembly in May. Countries representing the industry view had attempted to weaken the resolution.

Delegates to the WHA (the decision-making body of the World Health Organisation) were debating a resolution urging governments "to ensure that there are no donations of free or subsidised supplies of breastmilk substitutes and other products covered by the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in any part of the health care system." The European Commission and the USA, protecting their industry interests, initially tried to weaken the resolution with suggestions that it would cause legal problems. They proposed amendments mirroring the industry's position, which would have allowed supplies to be channelled into hospitals and made the monitoring of donations impossible.

Speaking on behalf of all African countries, the Swaziland delegation called for the original resolution to be strengthened. African dele-

gates vehemently rejected the assumption that Africa needs donations from baby food companies, stressing that such donations are nothing more than a promotional technique. Kenya stated that if the issue came to a vote, it would insist on a roll call of member states "so that those who are unfair to babies would be known by name."

Baby Milk Action's Patti Rundall represented Save the Children at the debate: speaking on food aid and free supplies, she told delegates, "The real need for breastmilk substitutes is greatly exaggerated by the companies who need to convince us all that health services cannot manage without their help and that lactation failure is normal. Donations of proprietary brands are an excellent way to open up new markets and create dependency on imported products."

The African position was supported by several European countries including the UK, as well as by UNICEF, UNHCR and the pro-breastfeeding NGOs. The mounting concern resulted in a compromise whereby all sides withdrew their amendments and agreed to the original text. This led to a vote in favour of the International Code by the USA, the only country to vote against when it was adopted in 1981, moving the issue into a new era of global consensus. The resolution's adoption was greeted with near-universal applause - only the industry lobbyists remained silent.

To date, the baby food in-

dustry has failed to respond positively to the resolution, which clarifies the International Code. Nestlé has failed to mention it at all in the huge volume of new literature it has produced.

Insufficient milk or insufficient support?

Disturbing press articles and television programmes are appearing in the USA and the UK, linking breastfeeding with dehydration of babies and even death. The first such article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* just before World Breastfeeding Week in August, highlighting what was termed the "yuppie syndrome" of mothers harming their babies who didn't receive enough milk from breastfeeding before being "saved" by infant formula.

This was followed by similar pieces in the *Mail on Sunday*, *Time* magazine and on US TV. While the stories state that breastfeeding is best, the underlying message is so horrific that it promotes bottle feeding. The media coverage focused on US mothers who had little or no support from the health care system after leaving hospital. Such care is provided free to all mothers in the UK by health visitors and community midwives.

One alarming consequence of the absence of post-natal care was that mothers did not know to check the wetness of their babies' nappies. Dry nappies are a warning sign that something is wrong.

Dow Jones - the parent com-

pany of the *Wall Street Journal*, whose article sparked the other stories - uses the same public relations firm as US formula companies, Mead Johnson and Abbott Ross.

Another story in the *Sunday Times* reports that a US mother has been accused of murdering her baby by breastfeeding while taking drugs. No test was carried out to check for the presence of drugs in the mothers' milk, while the autopsy found that the baby suffered cot death. The case will make legal history and is likely to frighten mothers who smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs.

This spate of stories can only undermine breastfeeding. It appears at the same time as the baby milk industry has abandoned any pretence of supporting the Code in industrialised countries, continuing to perpetuate the myth of the bottle being the solution to insufficient milk. In the US, companies have threatened legal action against hospitals considering Baby Friendly Hospital status, citing breach of contract.

Cairo supports breastfeeding

International Baby Food Action Network campaigners from Swaziland, the Philippines, Guatemala and Switzerland attended the recent International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, succeeding in having the contraceptive effect of breastfeeding recognised in the final document.