

press release

**BABY MILK
ACTION**



World Health Assembly Resolution removes commercial influences from infant feeding programmes

May 2002

After a thorough debate and a 3-hour drafting session, a new strengthened Resolution on Infant and Young Child Nutrition (WHA 55.25) was adopted at the 55th World Health Assembly in Geneva on Saturday 18th May.

38 countries spoke in the debate, the large majority of speakers from the developing world calling for the draft text to be strengthened to ensure that the critical importance of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months was mentioned and that infant feeding programmes do not involve the baby feeding industry (beyond the requirement to respect the *International Code* and subsequent relevant WHA Resolutions). The Resolution endorses a new *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*, the outcome of a four-year consultative process involving all member states.

One issue that raised consciousness of the need to do more to protect breastfeeding in all countries, not just in developing countries, was the case of the 5 day old Belgian baby, who died of meningitis in March after being fed Nestlé *Beba 1* dried infant formula from a batch which was contaminated with *Enterobacter Sakazakii*. As a 'precautionary measure' on April 22, Nestlé blocked sales of the affected batches of *Beba 1* in Belgium and Luxembourg. It has not done so in Switzerland where the product is also sold. Nestlé maintains that current manufacturing processes are not sufficient to remove the contamination, indicating that the problem may be widespread. A search in Medline reveals many more cases of enterobacter sakazakii infections due to contamination of infant formula in the past years. IBFAN is calling for more to be done to warn the public about the risks of artificial feeding. (see IBFAN Press Release 10 May 2002)

Two new monitoring reports from the USA and Canada launched in Geneva at the time of the World Health Assembly also highlighted the flagrant violations of the *International Code* in industrialised countries and the failure to protect mothers' rights to make fully informed decisions about infant feeding.

During the Assembly debate on the draft resolution notable interventions were made by several countries: The Indian delegation called for the removal of the term 'commercial' saying: "*Commercial enterprises by definition are profit driven entities. It is neither appropriate nor realistic for the WHO to expect that commercial groups will work along with governments and other groups to protect, promote and support breastfeeding.*"

India also drew attention to WHA Resolution 49.15 which in 1996 urged member states to ensure that monitoring is carried out in a transparent independent manner, free from commercial influence and that financial support for professionals working in infant and young child health does not create conflict of interest.

These concerns were reinforced by a number of countries including Palau which appealed to WHO to *"protect Member States from undue and unwanted influence by industries and manipulation by them"*.

In addition to the intervention on the infant feeding debate, IBFAN and Consumers International made an intervention on the report on Diet, Nutrition and Physical Activity ([click here for text](#)). IBFAN supported the opening address by the Director General Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, in which she laid down a clear challenge to the trillion dollar food industry, referring to WHO's intention to *"reinvigorate WHO's work on diet, food safety and human nutrition,"* and the problem of *"excessive consumption of fatty, sugary and salty foods"*. Dr Brundtland said that:

"Getting loyalty to brand names is the key to influencing consumer behaviour - from the time children start to walk. Children currently influence 45% of household purchases in the US, and 65% in urban China.....Brand name promotions - whether for tobacco, alcohol or fast foods - are designed to take advantage of peoples subconscious..... There is certainly a need for guidance: in some cases, like tobacco advertising and alcohol advertising aimed at the young, what we need is control. WHO will play its part."

IBFAN warmly welcomed this new initiative but also expressed caution about the increasing trend towards Public Private Partnerships. These concerns were shared by the People's Health Movement and many NGOs such as, Infact and Health Action International. IBFAN called for an urgent review and change in WHO's checking procedures and guidelines on conflict of interest . Earlier in the infant feeding debate, several Member States had expressed concern about the new UN/Bill Gates backed Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) launched on 9th May. GAIN - ironically the name of an infant formula - involves companies known for pushing unhealthy brands of foods. The companies include Procter and Gamble, Kraft, (a subsidiary of Philip Morris, the tobacco giant) and Heinz a company well known for its violations of the baby food Code. WHO has in the past clearly indicated that it does not want to be involved in any 'partnership' or 'interaction' with the tobacco industry or any of its subsidiaries, but its guidelines on conflicts of interest are only in draft stage and are unclear. UNICEF by joining this initiative is also violating its own guidelines on the interaction with the private sector which exclude the tobacco as well as violators of *International Code*.

An article in the Wall St Journal on 9th of May, stated that the companies involved in GAIN expect the UN system to intervene on their behalf to lobby for favourable tariffs and tax rates and a speedier regulatory review of new products in targeted countries. WHO staff denied that such promises had been made, but failed to give assurances about whether they would be involved in this venture.

In his answer on the Nutrition debate Dr Derek Yach, Executive Director, of WHO's Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health Cluster, said that this issue needs to be addressed from a life course perspective, including infant and young child nutrition. He went on to note: *"the concern of Consumers International with regard to the possible adverse commercial influences on WHO's policy. And we certainly can assure you that as Dr Brundtland emphasised in her opening address, that we have a commitment to strengthen our protection of conflict and perceived conflict of interest. "*

WHO was also asked for an affirmation that initiatives such as GAIN would not be used to undermine breastfeeding or the progress made on banning health claims on foods for infants and young children. At the Codex Alimentarius labelling meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the week before the Assembly, this moved one step further. IBFAN stressed that fortified junk foods would not be the answer to malnutrition and called for WHO to conduct independent research into the impact of marketing on the very poor.

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