

# Who leads WHO?

In May, Baby Milk Action's Patti Rundall represented Save the Children (UK) at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva. Faced with excess caution from WHO staff, pressure from baby food companies and abuse from the US State Department, she and IBFAN workers from around the world tried to ensure that infant health received due consideration.

## Background

Every two years governments are required to report on progress in implementation of the International Code. At previous Assemblies, governments have strengthened, clarified and reiterated the Code.

Delegates to the WHA create WHO policy. The Secretariat's role is to advise delegates, raise funds and implement policy. The Secretariat plays a role in interpreting policy to the media and the public. Their statements are sometimes perceived as having equal, if not more status than Resolutions, despite the fact that Resolutions always take precedence.

Since the International Code's adoption in 1981 both the political climate and the Secretariat of WHO have changed dramatically. In 1988 Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, formerly Research Director for the pharmaceutical company, Hoffmann-la Roche, was elected as Director General. He was the favoured candidate of the US and Japan, two of the six major drug-exporting countries, who provide 55% of WHO's income from member states. The US alone provides 25% of the budget and in 1986 and 1987 withheld its submission, allegedly in disapproval of WHO's moves to control the pharmaceutical and baby food industries. In 1981, the US was the only country to oppose the Code claiming that it would cause "serious constitutional problems for the US" and has since made little effort to implement it.

WHO also accepts money from many pharmaceutical and food companies. For example, by 1991, WHO received \$343,500 from Nestlé.

After years of being refused by WHO, the baby food industry (represented by the Infant Food

Manufacturers Association (IFM)) was granted official status with WHO in 1987. The International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU), one of IBFAN's founders, had been accepted in 1986. WHO, in attempting to be even-handed to both consumers and industry, ignored the two groups' different motivations: consumers want to promote the International Code while industry has a vested interest in stalling WHO policies. WHO's concern now seems to be to show that close relations with industry are productive and that IFM is 'doing its best' to comply with the Code, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary from IBFAN and national delegations.



*Baby Friendly? WHO Director General Dr Nakajima with an IBFAN baby*

## WHA 1992

The Resolution proposed by this year's Executive Board was good in parts. Like the Director General's report, it contains useful information on breastfeeding but makes no criticism of the baby food industry. IBFAN was particularly concerned by weaknesses in the Resolution: the food industry was cited as an acceptable partner in

the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative; there was no discussion of GATT and international trade and the resolution failed to state that follow up milks are covered by the Code. Amendments to strengthen the resolution were proposed by Kenya, Swaziland and Czechoslovakia but were nearly all overridden in a hastily convened drafting committee. This Committee met before the debate was over - at the same time as an important inter-governmental meeting on breastfeeding.

Patti Rundall's speech focused on the above issues and stressed the need for caution in the distribution of milk by relief workers in emergencies. She criticised the companies' duplicity over their statements on HIV. WHO and UNICEF share IBFAN's concern that the baby food industry should not exploit the AIDS issue for commercial gain and that implementation of the Code is even more important in this light. Despite having previously promised WHO that they would be not use the AIDS issue, delegates told IBFAN that IFM representatives implied during the Assembly that HIV-positive mothers should not breastfeed (see page 8). On the advice of the head of the AIDS Unit, Patti Rundall highlighted industry's behaviour in her speech. This was censored in the summary record, which reports her as simply being appreciative of IFM's promise.. Baby Milk Action has requested that this be corrected when the official record is published.

After speeches from IBFAN and IFM, a delegate from the US State Department publicly attacked the consumer lobby and accused it of twisting the arms of delegates. Many delegates were offended and alarmed by the US

speech. The WHO Secretariat also expressed its concern. In response to many complaints, the US Surgeon General later stated that the US came to these meetings in a spirit of cooperation and did not want to be isolated in this forum. She made a warm statement of appreciation for the work of the lobbyists and asked for her colleague's comments to be deleted from the record. This was greeted with applause from the floor.

Although the Resolution is not as strong as we hoped, it still contains many useful and positive statements. It states that all products promoted for bottle feeding are covered by the Code and condemns all promotion of breastmilk substitutes.

Baby Milk Action continues to maintain close relations with WHO on the understanding that collaboration is essential for the implementation of the Code. For new marketing strategies to be countered effectively, it is vital that strong action is taken whether acceptable to the US and industry or not. Hopefully WHO can be persuaded that leading these forces rather than trailing behind them is the only way forward.



*Idrian Resnick of ACTION (on the right) and US State Department's Mr Boyer.*

Please send an SAE for a copy of *Infant and Young Child Feeding*. Resolution of 45th WHA May 1992. *Infant and Young Child feeding*. Report by the Director-General. EB89/28 Nov 1991. Is available for £2