

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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MILK AND THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT
By Councilor Pilar C. Braga, PhD

That breast milk is best for babies is an incontestable truth. The essential of life for millions of infants is mother's milk, but multinational corporations and their local subsidiaries producing baby formula advertise in a manner that can get mothers hooked on their powdered infant formula as a substitute for breast-feeding.

In the light of the recent happening in China where thousands of babies falling ill because of tainted milk products, from baby formula to milk chocolates, I think it is all the more timely and even long overdue that we revisit the Milk Code Law.

Countless books, studies, articles, and advocacy groups have discussed the benefits of breastfeeding—the complete nutrition and critical boost to the immune system it gives the baby, plus the benefits not just to the mother's health but to her finances. The dangers of breast milk substitutes or "follow-on" infant formula are as well-documented. Among other things, babies given infant formula are more prone to infections, diarrhea, respiratory diseases, allergies, diabetes, and malnutrition. Moreover, infant formula has been found to contain bacteria such as *Enterobacter sakazakii* and *Salmonella enterica*. An April 24, 2007 Philippine Star article cited in the Philippine Council for Health Research Development website states: "Even milk companies admit that nothing comes close to breast milk as the best nutrition for babies."

Despite this, breastfeeding in the Philippines has been losing out to infant formula through the years. According to UNICEF, only 16 percent of children four to five months old are exclusively breast-fed, while 13 percent are not breast-fed at all, a significantly lower figure compared to 25 percent in 2003. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that 16,000 children die every year from illnesses and complications

caused by improper feeding practices, including the use of infant formula.

This is where breastfeeding advocacy comes in. It's very difficult because you get so much resistance. You get resistance from advertising and the milk companies' vested interests. You get resistance from mothers who are convinced that powdered milk is good enough. Then you have to teach children to keep them from imbibing the formula-milk culture.

The three goals of breastfeeding advocacy: protection, promotion, and support. Protection means you fight those people who are fooling us. Promotion, that you make mothers want to breastfeed. And support, because even mothers who want to breastfeed need to be supported. They don't have models to guide them; their own mothers didn't do it anymore. And people around them are using bottles. So even if mothers decide to breastfeed, if there is nobody to help them, they end up surrendering to social pressure.

The basis for protection was set in 1981 when the World Health Assembly adopted the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes as a minimum standard for governments. Among other things, the Code forbids milk companies and their representatives

- No public advertising of breast milk substitutes, bottles or nipples.

- No free formula samples to new mothers.

- No promotion of formula products in health care facilities.

- No nurses employed by formula manufacturers to advise new mothers.

- No distribution of formula gift packs or samples to health care workers.

- No words or infant pictures on product labels idealizing formula feeding.

- Only scientific and factual information on feeding methods should be given to health-care workers.

- All information on formula feeding, including labels, should explain the associated costs and hazards.
- Unsuitable products, such as sweetened condensed milk, should not be promoted for infant feeding.
- All formula products should be of high quality and take into account the climatic and storage conditions of the country where it might be used.

Thanks to vigorous lobbying by NGOs, Executive Order 51 or the National Code was signed in 1986. It soon became evident that stricter rules were needed to give EO 51 some teeth against the tactics of milk companies to circumvent the law. Breastfeeding advocates, with the support of the WHO and UNICEF, again lobbied in 2004 for the Revised Implementing Rules and Regulations (RIRR) for EO 51.

Twelve versions later, the advocates met with success. In May 2006, Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Dr. Francisco Duque passed the RIRR, which includes a ban on the advertising and promotion of milk substitutes for children up to two, with an absolute ban on false health and nutritional claims. The new rules would restrict entry of infant formula and sample products into hospitals. It will not prohibit all ads, only ads that make false claims, like 'drinking this formula will produce geniuses who are loveable and affectionate.

It's easy to see why milk companies disliked the RIRR. Stroll through any supermarket or watch TV for an hour and you are bound to see plenty of Code violations, ranging from improper labels to mass retail-selling to advertisements of milk formulas touting things like prebiotics, nucleotides, taurine, and additives that supposedly produce a gifted child. Researchers have been studying the components of breast milk, and milk companies are attempting to copy this. But the taurine in a mother's breast milk is intended for human babies. Where exactly does formula milk get its taurine? Contrary to what advertising say, milk formula, which is derived from cow's milk, just cannot be realistic. We

do not see any gifted cows. We do not see any cows playing chess or the piano.

The ads are spurious. Unfortunately, they are profoundly influential, especially with the masses. That's the problem with unethical marketing practices, the advertising makes poor mothers feel deprived because they cannot afford to buy infant formula. They will breastfeed their children because they have to, but if they get money, they will buy what is advertised as good formula milk.

And as far as advertised formula milk is concerned, let us look at the case of melamine-contaminated milk from China. World Health Organization sources declared that only mothers who have been relying so much on formula milk to feed their babies and children were affected by this latest scandal. These are the same thousands of mothers in China who believed and relied on the reliability of advertised formula milk.

Middle- and upper-class mothers have access to books and the Internet, where they can learn the facts about infant formula and breastfeeding. But poor mothers rely mostly on the TV, where formula ads are aired, day and night, for information. The result is a deeply ingrained belief that expensive, imported, and artificial is better than free, ideal, and natural. The sad part of the advocacy is hearing mothers say 'I am breastfeeding because I am poor and I cannot buy this product'. Some even resort to stealing, and when you go to groceries you see pictures of mothers who were caught stealing cans of formula milk. It's a painful reality.

The milk industry was quick to react. In July 2006 Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP) filed suits against the Department of Health (DOH) secretary and all his undersecretaries and petitioned the Supreme Court for a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the RIRR. The Supreme Court denied the petition. PHAP tried again, and in August 2006, right after the second celebration of World Breastfeeding Week in Malacañang, where advocates marked the 25th anniversary of the International Code, the 20th anniversary of the

National Code, and the formal launch of the Revised Implementing Rules and Regulations (RIRR), the Supreme Court reversed its decision and issued the TRO.

The milk companies' main objection to the RIRR is that it will restrict trade. They cannot defend milk formula in terms of whether it's better than breast milk. They just say, we have a legitimate product we're selling to those who can't breastfeed, so allow us to sell. But the point is, we're not stopping them from selling. We're stopping them from unmitigated advertising that convinces mothers that their formula is the best.

Breastfeeding is the least costly and most far-reaching strategy for the alleviation of poverty. The National Economic Development Authority estimates that milk companies import P3.1 billion worth of infant formula milk and sell it to the people (often to those least able to afford it) at seven times the cost at or P21.5 billion every year.

For a family earning P7,280, milk purchases constitute 30 percent of its income. We can take that P21.5 billion and convert it into housing, classrooms, textbooks, salaries for teachers. You can pay a third of our country's P60 billion-a-year foreign loans. The benefits of breastfeeding should make national officials and policy makers sit up and take notice. It would be beneficial to our country's trade and economy to protect breastfeeding.

There are good news on breastfeeding advocates. SM Supermalls has established Breastfeeding Stations in all SM malls. The first Breastfeeding Station was launched in Megamall in March 2006. There were massive, media-covered events such as the two "*Sabay-Sabay, Sumuso sa Nanay*" gatherings, the first held in May 2006, which broke the Guinness World Record on the most number of people breastfeeding simultaneously in one location; and again in 2007, which set a new World Record for the most number of people breastfeeding simultaneously in multiple locations. The event is set to be held every May 1. The institutionalization of the *World Breastfeeding Week celebration*,

through Presidential Proclamation 884, to be held every August 1 to 7, is also a milestone; plus of course the numerous exhibits, lectures, workshops, and activities each of the groups are holding on their own. And just recently, I had the honor, together with the DOH, to inaugurate the Breastfeeding Room at the Davao City Overland Transport Terminal (DCOTT).

Today as we move on through this Milk Code Seminar, we are all confronted with greater challenges to face - we have to push through greater efforts so that more mothers can be informed about provisions of the Milk Code.

The issue on the Supreme Court reversing itself and granting a temporary restraining order against the Department of Health on the MILK CODE RIRR is something that we all need to understand and look into. Until the court action is settled, the Health Department cannot act to protect Filipino children.

Thank you and good morning to all.