

The Controversial Code for Mother's Milk

Debates usually cry out to be designated "A versus B," but currently raging in the United States is an issue that defies such simple labeling: to what extent should the World Health Organization be allowed to regulate the sale of infant formulas? It recently peaked in Geneva when WHO met to consider a voluntary code to restrict the marketing practices of and ban advertising by the \$2 billion-per-year international infant formula industry in order to encourage breast feeding. When the final vote — 118 to 1 — was in, the United States stood alone, the only government to vote against the code. "The U.S. *government*, not the United States," says Stephen C. Joseph, formerly of the Agency for International Development (AID), "because in this case, there is a difference." Indeed, the U.S. vote against the code set in motion a wave of protest against the Reagan administration among health professionals, church and consumer activists and even actress Linda Kelsey of television series "Lou Grant" fame, who charged that one million Third World infants die each year of diseases associated with misuse of infant formulas — mixing them with contaminated water, for example. And, in what was perhaps the climax of this protest, code-backers Joseph and Eugene N. Babb resigned their senior positions at AID, calling the U.S. vote "unconscionable" and a detriment to the health of Third World children.

What appears to be at issue between the code backers and the government is the breast versus the bottle. And while that dichotomy has been implied, the real divi-

sion is something like this: On the one hand are the health care professionals and activists who believe that the promotion of infant formula discourages the more advantageous use of mother's milk. On the other hand is the administration—heavily pelted by lobbyists for the baby food industry — that says it theoretically supports the concept of breast feeding; claims there is no convincing evidence for a link between formula use and infant mortality; and maintains that the baby formula code violates First Amendment protection of commercial speech and restricts international trade.

This very complex controversy has been raging for about a decade. One of its pioneer participants was Derrick B. Jelliffe of the University of California at Los Angeles, who, with his wife, E. F. Patrice, wrote *Human Milk in the Modern World* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1978). Jelliffe says the issue's foremost consideration—one that all sides in the controversy recognize—is that mother's milk is more healthy for infants than is artificial formula. This is partly because food chemists have not yet precisely decoded nature's formula. Breast milk's "every trace element — chemicals found in all foods in very small quantities — may have a nutritional role," explains J. Steven Morris at the University of Missouri Research Reactor in Columbia. Morris and colleagues are using an analytical technique called neutron activation analysis — monitoring gamma rays produced by milk samples after exposure to neutrons from a reactor—to compare the trace elements of formula to breast milk.

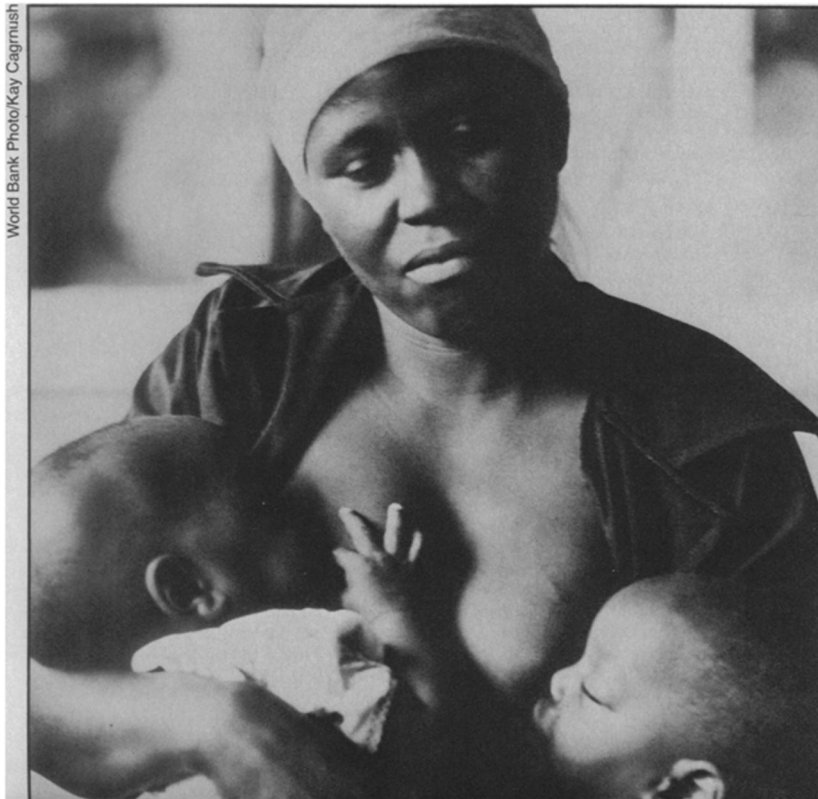
Is this mysterious equation of trace elements present in less than well-nourished mothers — that is, can mildly malnourished mothers adequately breast feed their babies? "The answer is yes," Jelliffe says, citing a study reported in the May 1979 *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF CLINICAL NUTRITION* by Edgar Lauber and Michael Reinhardt. These Swiss researchers used lipid and protein contents of milk samples and infant growth as measures of the quality of breast milk from women in a rural community of the Ivory Coast. Interestingly, the research was funded by the Nestlé Foundation, relative of the Nestlé Co., which has cornered 50 percent of the Third World infant formula sales and was the object of a 1977 boycott to protest the various formula companies' questionable means of promoting formulas in the Third World. "The whole article is worded in such a way that all the negatives are emphasized, and all the positives are obscured," Jelliffe says. Nonetheless, the Swiss researchers proved "quite clearly that . . . breast feeding alone was sufficient for 5 to 6 months."

In addition to passing on essential trace nutrients, mother's milk contains antibodies that help protect infants against infection. It also delays the return of the menstrual cycle (thereby acting as a contraceptive), strengthens the psychological bond between mother and child and is free. "Under these circumstances, to promote formula is a minus, a destructive force," Jelliffe says.

"The whole of breast feeding depends on confidence," Jelliffe explains. Anything that plants seeds of doubt in the mind of breast-feeding mothers — such as infant formula advertising that could be interpreted as suggesting formula babies will be healthier — triggers a worry reflex that in turn leads to inadequate lactation.

But the administration chose to oppose a code that would restrict such advertising. "AID fully supports that decision," says AID Administrator M. Peter McPherson. "AID has consistently endorsed the promotion of breastfeeding as the preferred form of infant nutrition. . . . However, the administration feels that it is inappropriate for an agency of the United Nations to move in the direction of regulating economic activity," McPherson says. "However well intended, these codes set dangerous precedents which the United States will continue to oppose."

For former AID official Joseph, however, it is the U.S. *government*, not the United States, that continues to oppose the code. "I will continue to speak out and write in an attempt to change the U.S. government's position on the matter," he says. "It's never too late." □



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