

Boycott in the Name of Babies

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Picture the young, illiterate mother in teeming Singapore or rural Nigeria. She knows it will take her best efforts to keep her new baby alive. Above her bed in the maternity ward is a glossy poster of a fat baby, chuckling with its baby bottle and a tin of powdered formula.

Before the mother even begins to breast-feed her new baby, she is visited by a 'milk nurse' dressed in crisp, authoritative white. The 'nurse' is an employee of the baby formula company, and she leaves a sample tin with the mother. Ah, the magic promise of this western elixir.

Back the mother goes to the village, where the stream that is the village water supply is also the village sewer. There is no fridge, and no way to sterilize the bottle. And there is no money: it would take 75 percent of the family's income to keep on buying formula.

So she dilutes it more and more, stretching the powder with dirty river water. One tin, meant to last three days, lasts three weeks. When even that is gone she uses tea instead. She has no choice because her own breast milk dried up weeks ago.

The baby cries; he has diarrhea and begins to vomit. His belly is a swollen drum and his bones are etched sharply under his taut skin.

Then he dies, and is one of the 10 million Third World babies who, according to medical experts, succumb every year to 'baby bottle disease.' If he had lived, he would have been retarded from infant malnutrition.

This horrible little scenario is at the heart and core of the Nestle boycott. Nestle has 50 percent of the Third World infant formula market, estimated at \$1.5 billion annually. (Impressive as that may be, baby formula accounts for only 8 percent of Nestle's sales.) Though its empire is flung across the globe from Guatemala to Bangkok, its ownership sits snugly out of reach in Switzerland. . . immune to North American laws, but not, it seems, to economic pressure.

The chorus of outrage began to mount a decade ago when leading medical and nutrition experts reported a stunning increase in babies damaged or dead through 'bottled malnutrition.'

Nestle and other smaller companies were aggressively marketing their product in every undeveloped nation of the world. 'Milk nurses' penetrated even the Amazon jungle. Nestle wooed Third World doctors with fancy medical equipment, free travel to conventions, and loads of free samples. Posters, radio ads and billboards told naive mothers that formula

feeding made 'healthy, happy babies.'

In Singapore, breast-feeding plunged from 71 percent to 5 percent. In Chile, bottle-fed babies had death rates two to three times higher than breast-fed babies. Here in Canada, where Nestle doesn't sell formula but others do, a 1962 study by two Canadian pediatricians showed that one-third of Canadian Indian baby deaths were due to bottle-feeding.

By last year, world support for the boycott was overwhelming. Just before the National Council of Churches voted to endorse the boycott, the distinguished Dr. Michael Latham, director of the program of international nutrition at Cornell University, rose to tell them: 'I may sound emotional about this issue. . . . I have frequently seen babies die unnecessarily because they were bottle fed. . . .'

'I have no doubt,' he said, 'that Nestle is guilty.'

Though Nestle's 'milk nurses' are now called 'medical representatives,' promoting formula to doctors only, and though the company has vowed not to advertise to mothers, frequent and flagrant violations are reported.

Last year in the U.S., Senator Edward Kennedy chaired a Senate investigation into the scandal of those 10 million babies. Nestle argued that it was providing a clean, healthy product, a necessary service for working mothers. Experts showed that only 6 percent of Third World mothers have to give up breast-feeding in order to work. And they argued that Nestle knowingly pushed its product at the world's poor, who can't possibly muster the literacy, cash or clean water to use the formula properly.

'We cannot have that responsibility, sir,' a Nestle executive told the incredulous Senator Kennedy. When I phoned Nestle in Toronto and New York, no one was available to speak to me.

In Canada, the United Church is leading the Nestle boycott. Call David Hallman, the church's spokesman for International Year of the Child, at (416) 925-5931 for more information.

Some of Nestle's products on the boycott list are: Nestle's CRUNCH, Quik, Taster's Choice, Nescafe, Nestea, Sunrise, Swiss Knight and Cherry Hill cheese, Libby's, Crosse and Blackwell, L'oreal and Lancome cosmetics, McVities, Keiller.

This article first appeared in the *Toronto Star*, Aug. 28, 1979.