

Death from the bottle – rotten business with baby milk

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Welcome to PANORAMA, today a little later and a little shorter.

Just born, they have almost no chance to survive. Every day, thousands of babies die all over the world. They starve, they dry up, they languish with severe infections.

The reason for this is not only famine or bad hygienic conditions but the baby bottle.

The numbers have been lying on the table for years. But still the ideal advertisement-world of the baby food companies keeps promising to mothers healthy and bonny children if they give the bottle instead of the breast. While in western countries breastfeeding is a question of conviction it can be a matter of life and death in the southern hemisphere.

Thomas Berndt and Nocola von Hollander about craving for profit with babies as the victims.

Comment:

Pricila Arnes tries to wake up her baby – again and again. But it does not react, it is lying in coma. A virus infection has inflamed the brain of the nine month old boy.

Diagnosis: meningitis. Chance of survival uncertain. Day and night the mother is sitting at his bedside, here in the biggest clinic in Manila in the Philippines, even though she knows she will hardly be able to help.

Voice Over - Pricila Arnes (Translation)

“I pray every day, every day. Our life is no longer the way it used to be. We are just peasants and poor, but we were happy. Now I do not know what will happen.”

Comment:

Happy and healthy children, this is what the ideal advertisement-world had promised her. Nestlé even promotes baby food with the slogan: better immunity for the child.

But the virus came from the bottle. Pricila Arnes has mixed the powdered milk substitute with contaminated water, she did not boil it enough. She did not know better. The doctor describes his ordeal: At first, her son had shortness of breath, then infections of the stomach, and finally meningitis.

Voice Over - Asunción A. Silvestre, university of Manila (Translation):

“There is a very strong link, because you have to mix the powdered milk with absolutely clean water in order to be safe. But this family had no clean tap water. And if the water and bottle are not boiled and sterilised long enough, then it is the same as feeding the baby infection.”

Comment:

The fate of a bottle-baby, not only in the Philippines. Contaminated water, powdered milk, germs – an often deadly mixture, known for years and scientifically proven.

Gisela Meese (UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative)

“UNICEF and WHO estimate that 1,5 million children die every year from the consequences of bottlefeeding.”

Michael Abou-Dakn (VIVANTES-Humboldt clinic Berlin)

“We can see in an English study that also in industrialised countries up to the age of five years bottlefed children die more often than breastfed children. This has surprised and scared us. We had always believed that this was a problem only in developing countries, but in industrialised countries it is just the same problem because breastmilk is the optimum. What disadvantages have children who are not breastfed? They get infectious diseases much more often, from light infections to severe diarrhea for example.”

Comment:

Reason enough for the World Health Organization, the WHO, at Geneva to act. More than 20 years ago, advertisement and marketing of breastmilk substitutes was severely limited, laid down in an International Code, accepted by the companies, for the protection of the babies.

Voice Over - James Akaré (WHO) (Translation)

“These powdered milks should actually be used only in emergencies, only under supervision by medical personnel. I find it frustrating to watch the companies break our Code again and again. But companies do what companies do: sell their products.”

Comment:

Example: Philippines. Every day, about 6.000 children are born here, most of them at home. A lucrative market for the companies – and almost no control. So the worldwide leader in the market, Nestlé, is sending its representatives across the country, apparently with success. The promotion works. Nurses like Darlene are the best publicity media, though after the WHO-Code that is not allowed. There it is stated explicitly: No gifts or free samples to health care personnel. But the practice is different.

Voice Over - Darlene Merilles (nurse) (Translation)

“The representatives of Nestlé came to us for a product launch. They gave us free samples. And if they thought that the product was selling very well, they came to us and invited us to the beach, to beach-resorts, to a barbecue or to a restaurant.”

Comment:

Nestlé, the headquarters in Switzerland. Here, they consider such marketing methods totally normal. Of course the health personnel would get free samples only for scientific purposes. That way they would comply with the Code.

François-Xavier Perroud (Nestlé AG):

“The nurses are not normally invited to beach-resorts, instead it could be, in one case or the other, where the clinic was close to such a resort, that lunch was organized there in an agreeable setting. This is in no way illegal, but it is absolutely normal, customary hospitality for Philippinenean standards.”

Comment:

The company seems to know very well customs and way of life everywhere. Here too: China, the biggest market in the world. About 52,000 children are born here every day; all of them potential customers. For example in this baby-shop in Peking, there are many special offers, including milk substitutes, although that is forbidden by the WHO Code. There it says: No advertisement, gifts or discounts for milk substitutes. Here, too, the practice looks different.

Voice Over - Sales clerk (Translation):

“Sometimes we have advertising campaigns and give discounts. Then the people get a teddy bear if they buy six cans. The manufacturers organise that, also the gifts.”

Comment:

We show these pictures to the Nestlé spokesman, too, and he knows, the WHO-Code applies to everybody, from the chair through the distribution to the salesperson.

François-Xavier Perroud (Nestlé AG) :

“If there actually has been a promotion, then it definitely is an error, a violation of the Code. As soon as this example is documented, we will contact the distributor in question and emphasize that such promotions are not allowed.”

Gisela Meese (UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative)

“Nestlé is one of those transnational manufacturers who as far as we know also constantly violates the Code, the various provisions. UNICEF has commissioned a study, and the results of this study say that the leading manufacturers of babyfood violated all provisions of the Code in all countries.”

Comment:

Germany. Here, too, the companies fight for every customer, every baby – from mother's breast to the bottle. In this breastfeeding support group in Hamburg, half of the mothers got direct advertising from companies like Humana and others. After the WHO Code, this is forbidden, there it says: no free samples for mothers. Here, too, the practice is different.

Mother:

"Well, from Humana I received a package. That was in my baby's third month. It contained a letter describing that the baby can receive follow-up formula, and for allergic babies, there are products, too, in that product line. Then two samples with follow-up formula and banana-milk-pap and a nutrition plan for the whole first year of life, from Humana."

Voice Over - James Akré (WHO) (Translation):

"This is a common practice for all products. The WHO has clearly stated in the Code that this is not acceptable for breastmilk substitutes."

Comment:

No interview for PANORAMA about this with Humana. The company from Herford in Westfalia only wrote to us saying: generally, they would send free samples only on request. This, though, has never been the case with the mother we interviewed.

Every 30 seconds a baby dies, somewhere in the world – because it is not breastfed. Babies die also because for the last more than twenty years, the companies find ever new marketing strategies to circumvent the WHO-regulations – market shares are apparently more important than the human lives .

Gisela Mees (BFHI-Initiative):

"The scandal is that the great risks are known, because of illiteracy, lack of drinking water, poverty and other factors. And in spite of this knowledge this product is being promoted. And you can really only say that it is grossly negligent to offer powdered milk as appropriate food for their babies to people living in such conditions."

François-Xavier Perroud (Nestlé AG) :

"Under no circumstances will we allow to be edged out of this area. And we are happy that we could safeguard a healthy survival to millions of children, thanks to our products."

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