The side of life

AT LARGE

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sources, the country is also faced with a fast-
dwindling pool of health professionals. We all
have heard about the migration of doctors to
the nursing profession. And we all know that
the number of doctors and nurses who choose
to leave the country and work abroad is reach-
ing unprecedented levels. Unfortunately,
joining them are midwives, many of whom aban-
don their training and profession altogether to
work as domestics or housemaids.

Some—maybe many—of you would doubt-
less be joining this migratory flock soon. And let
me say that you are well within your rights to
seek a better life and a more secure future for
yourselves and your families. But think a while
about why you chose to be midwives in the first
place. Part of the appeal of midwifery was doubt-
less the chance to work directly with mothers
and their children, to be of service to patients
who could in time be your neighbors and
friends. And yet, if you were to leave at once for
more lucrative options abroad, you would be
missing this chance to both serve and inspire,
practice your profession among people who
need your energy, skill and heart the most.

Would it be too much to ask that you stay
around for a few years before you set off for a
future among foreigners?

ALLOW me at this point to talk about another
advocacy with you. But first, let me tell you about
a documentary I just viewed last night that was
called "Formula for Disaster." Produced by Unicef,
the documentary details the ways in which milk
companies routinely violate the Milk Code with
aggressive marketing practices, including compro-
mising health workers and midwives by pressuring
them to promote infant formula brands and giving
away material incentives.

Let me tell you that I was most shocked by health
workers who would mouth the various brands of in-
fant formula but hardly spoke of the advantages of
breast milk, even if they said their main task was to
promote breast-feeding. Midwives interviewed for
the documentary said that while the Milk Code does
not allow them to entertain drug and milk company
representatives in the health centers, "poorly paid
midwives" prevented them from driving them away, so
they would entertain the sales rep briefly and graciously
accept the freebies they offered.

Still, "Formula for Disaster" was not all nega-
tive. It also featured two midwives—one in Cebu,
the other in Bulacan—who believed so strongly in
the advantages of breast-feeding that they re-
fused even the most tempting offers from milk
companies and turned down even the most in-
triguing items.

YOU, better than me, know what the decline in
breast-feeding in this country means. Just 16
percent of Filipino children between 4 and 5
months old are exclusively breast-fed, and as
one foreigner commented, this is "one of the
lowest documented rates in the world."

The World Health Organization says some
16,000 babies a year die here as a result of the
decline in breast-feeding. Many of these deaths
can be attributed to malnutrition and diarrhea,
as a consequence of parents diluting the formula
to make it last longer, using the wrong kind of
milk, or using unsafe water or contaminated
bottles and nipples. As midwives, you will see
with your own eyes the horrific consequences of
bottle-feeding, including the slow painful de-
cline of bottle-fed children from chronic illness,
lethargy and mental retardation.

But as midwives, too, you are in a powerful
position to turn this decline around, to stand as
frontliners against the marketing onslaught of
multinational milk companies and to stand as
witness to the joy and benefits of breast-feed-
ing. I hope you choose the right side—the side of
life, the side of what is truly best for our babies.