

## LETTER

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### PHAP item quotes false 'Unicef reports'

THE news item "PHAP stands firm on breast-feeding debate" published in your paper on November 28, 2006, made inferences based on unspecified "Unicef reports" which distort the facts about the status of infant and young child feeding in the Philippines. Please provide space for us to correct these misconceptions.

Your report quotes an unnamed Unicef report saying that the Philippines is "among the highest breast-feeding nations with 88 percent initiation rate." We know of no published Unicef report carrying this data.

Furthermore, Unicef does not track this indicator in any of its reports about infant and young-child feeding, primarily because it does not provide useful information regarding the ability of children to receive the primary benefits of breast-feeding. Indeed, we are perplexed as to how such figure can be ascribed to Unicef and would appreciate knowing your source for this.

Your article also mentioned that the same report cited the Philippines for having "the second highest exclusively breast-feeding society at four months at 47 percent." Again, we know of no such data ever having been published in a Unicef report. In fact, Unicef data on exclusive breast-feeding in the Philippines is drawn from the National Demographic and Health Survey, page 150, Table 10.2, which shows a figure of 16.1 percent exclusive breast-feeding rate at five months.

Finally, Mr. Ed Fiest's statement at the end of the piece implies that breast-feeding advocates are limiting the freedom of choice of mothers. This is a clever distortion of the facts. Regulating unscrupulous marketing practices in no way amounts to a ban on sales. Nothing that the Department of Health and the growing number of concerned breast-feeding advocates in the Philippines call for can be described as a limit on the choices of mothers, Unicef supports the Philippines Department of Health's efforts to strictly control the marketing and promotion of artificial breast-milk substitutes, in conformity with internationally accepted standards as defined by the World Health Organization. This is vital in a developing country like the Philippines where excessive glamorization and exaggerated health claims ascribed to artificial breast-milk substitutes induce poor families to abandon the cheapest, safest and healthiest source of nutrition for their young children—breast-feeding.

The revised IRR of the Executive Order 51 by the DOH seeks only to regulate the marketing of breast-milk substitutes. The revised IRR will enable mothers to make informed choices based on accurate and reliable information. Impartial information cannot come from parties that stand to make profit from one choice or another. And if mothers make truly informed choices about the feeding of their children then nobody can make them feel guilty.

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