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Enforcing the law: Botswana teaches the world

Breastfeeding advocates everywhere have to constantly struggle with conflicts of interest, corporate sponsorship and public-private partnerships with the baby food industry. Few countries have laws which prohibit industry sponsorship of health workers and the handful which do, don't often use the legal tools they have. But every so often we hear of valiant acts to uphold the integrity of the health profession and their obligation to defend the right of children to the highest standard of health. See, for example, the article: **Scottish public health conference cancelled after protest by senior NHS speaker against its commercial sponsor**, at <http://www.ibfan-icdc.org/index.php/news/code-related>.

Botswana was another episode: it all happened in two weeks !

On 25 June 2014, ICDC received notice that there would be an infant and young child nutrition workshop in July. The event, hosted by a government agency, was to be funded by a few corporate sponsors among them, Nestlé. The people being sponsored to attend the workshop were health workers. The workshop was to be held at a four star hotel.

The workshop was organised, purportedly, to share the results of a study on the rates of exclusive breastfeeding in Botswana conducted in collaboration with the Human Health Division of the International Atomic Agency (IAEA). But also on the agenda was a slot whereby Nestlé would be allowed to make a presentation on the "*Effects of Probiotics during the first 1000 days.*"

Since Botswana's **Marketing of Foods for Infant Foods and Young Children** Regulations makes it an offence for the baby food industry to sponsor health workers, the Ministry of Health promptly sent out a warning to the conference organisers that accepting sponsorship for the event was an offence. IBFAN offices which were alerted about the workshop, including ICDC, INFANT and IBFAN Africa, rapidly weighed in

with their arguments regarding the legitimacy of the workshop.

The conference organisers responded contending that

- material support from companies was to ensure the successful hosting of the workshop; that others were invited who were not health workers.
- discussion topics were not solely focussed on breastfeeding but safe nuclear research advocated by the IAEA.
- that the food industry does not influence the outcome of the research and would not use the workshop as a platform for promotion.
- engaging industry is a way of raising awareness on infant and child nutrition and forging a public private partnership that will enable all parties to act responsibly in the best interest of children.

When preliminary discussions with the conference organisers suggested that the workshop would proceed as planned, IBFAN offices responded with suggestions on the various courses of action the Ministry of Health could adopt to stop Nestlé from using the workshop to deceive policy makers and health workers. They saw the event as an example of how Nestlé works to subvert healthcare systems and workers into making formula use acceptable.

It turned out that the Ministry of Health takes the protection of infant and young child health very seriously.

They -

- called on WHO and UNICEF country offices to oppose sponsorship for the event. (UNICEF responded by declining to participate at the meeting. They sent a stern reminder to the conference organiser to uphold the law of the land as well as the International Code by not allowing commercial influence to infiltrate the workshop).

- started to look into the possibility of taking over the event to exclude industry sponsorship and Nestlé's slot at the conference which will focus on prebiotics.

- asked to review Nestlé's presentation and got feedback from IBFAN on inaccuracies and misrepresentation in the presentation.

- sent a strongly worded letter to the conference organiser citing research to clearly show how there is limited data on the safety and clinical effects of probiotics in infant formula. It was reiterated yet again that allowing Nestlé a slot to talk about probiotics was tantamount to a violation of the law.

- initiated plans to take over the workshop having figured out that the only major expense involved was the hiring of the conference venue, food and beverages.

- put the local IBFAN office (Botswana Breastfeeding Association-BOBA) on standby to showcase its work on breastfeeding to fill the slot they wanted Nestlé to vacate.

The proactive actions taken by the Ministry of Health somehow prompted the conference organisers to abide by the national law and to return the industry money. By 9 July, it was confirmed that Nestlé would be asked to withdraw their presentation.



Conference went on without Nestlé's presence, thanks to vigilance of MOH officials.

The Botswana episode shows us how important it is for officials vested with the responsibility of implementing national Code-based laws to be vigilant and to take proactive action to give meaning and life to their national laws. In this instance, officials from the Ministry of Health are to be lauded for courageously upholding their responsibilities under the Code and resolutions.

There is much hope for the children of Botswana. And another lesson for the world. ■



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