

NESTLE

by Michelle Adelman
from *The Varsity*
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The Nestle boycott is not a new issue. It's been around for four years now and the organizers have been distributing newsletters graced with the images of emaciated babies while warning consumers to stop buying Nestle products such as Libby's Beans and Nestle's Quik to help end the suffering of thousands of children in Third World countries. Nestle kills babies, boycotters say, by their unethical promotion of infant formula.

This intensive public awareness campaign has already had enough of an effect. This is demonstrated when Nestle's

World infant formula market.

Boycott groups say that for the sake of selling more formula, Nestle has stooped to all manners of sly and sophisticated advertising and marketing techniques to convince mothers who can breast feed that the bottle is best.

For instance, anti-Nestle groups say the company has taken advantage of the Third World's passion for things western by indirectly suggesting that bottle feeding is the modern Western way to feed a baby. Happy, blonde and plump babies symbolizing health and prosperity western style are shown together with cans of infant formula on posters hanging in hospitals, and the mothers can't help but make the connection. "Ownership of a

Nestle, of course, doesn't agree. Though the company has willingly pledged to follow a code laid down by the World Health Organization (WHO) early in 1981 to stop unethical marketing of baby food worldwide, Nestle still questions whether promotion is to blame for women in the Third World opting for bottle over breast feeding. While boycott groups regard Nestle's guilt in the deaths of thousands of children as an established fact and want to move on to the business of making sure companies abide by the marketing code so further deaths can be prevented, Nestle is still questioning the truth of the original accusations.

For instance, Nestle claims the widespread movement away from breast feeding, which it has been accused of causing, has not yet been proven to exist. It quotes an article in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying the WHO and the Human Lactation Center, "have failed to find any evidence for a global turn from breast feeding."

That may be so, asserts David Hallman, the United Church Coordinator for the Nestle Boycott, but it is in the Third World, not the world as a whole, where definite swing away from breast feeding have been observed and are causing concern. In Chile, for example, mothers choosing to breast feed beyond two months dropped from 95 to 20 per cent over a period of 10 years, he said.

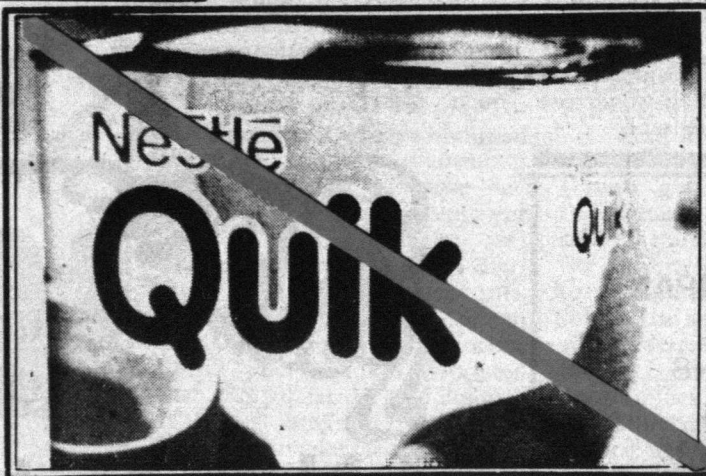
Nestle says its promotion of formula

where they don't know how to use it properly and where the water they mix it with is sure to be horribly contaminated. Still, women use it, at the cost of the health and lives of their children. Nestle itself recognizes formula is reaching rural markets it was not intended for, but says the company is powerless to do anything about it because it has no say in where the product is retailed.

While claiming their expensive infant formula was never intended for rural markets, Nestle literature suggests the formula that reaches those areas is somewhat of a godsend anyway. Quoting a study that Hallman says he has never heard of, Nestle reports undernourished Third World women, weighing up to 40 pounds less than their well-nourished western sisters, secrete only half as much breast milk. Mothers recognize this, says Nestle and introduce their children to other food early in order to supplement their diets. This early warning, the company reports, is common practice even in the most traditional of cultures.

Peterson calls these weaning foods "native gruels" and says they are low in nutrition. They're made of such things as mashed bananas and water, rice water and tea, or crushed crackers, water and sugar. Of course, all of the water involved is badly polluted. According to Nestle, infant formula is a desirable substitute for these gruels. "Even when the risk of misuse is high, it is surely preferable to start off with a supplement that has a high nutritional value like infant formula, than with thin starchy gruels of no food value," Peterson said.

Hallman counters immediately that a study printed in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 1979 proves malnourished mothers produce the same quality and quantity of breast milk as do well-nourished ones. He also says that the claim of early weaning prevailing even in traditional cultures is completely false, as breast feeding sometimes goes on until the child is two years old. But if a supplement is needed, he states, one of the staple foods of the region, like beans, is much more suitable than an expensive, commercially prepared formula. But, supplementation doesn't mean breast feeding should stop.



public affairs director in Canada, R.H. Peterson, declares solemnly at a public meeting that, "Nestle is not killing babies anywhere in the world," the faces of his audience look suddenly skeptical.

Nestle, the Swiss-based company Peterson describes as probably one of the largest food companies on earth, has fought back, and fought back vigorously, but still hasn't been able to quash the movement. Boycott groups call it the first international consumer boycott in the history of the world. Peterson says Nestle has failed to put it down because, "we're not very experienced at fighting boycotts... You can't look up boycott fighter in the yellow pages."

The controversy? It has to do with the way Nestle markets its infant formula products in Third World countries. Infant formula is a breast milk substitute, which is commercially produced, that even manufacturers like Nestle admit tries, but can't come close, to imitating human milk. That is the one point the two sides agree on. There is no food more perfect for the growth of an infant than the milk of its mother. Not only is it chock full of the very nutrients needed for early brain development, but mothers milk also passes along immunizing antibodies built up in the mother's body. These antibodies protect the baby's delicate constitution against potentially fatal diseases brought on by bacteria in its everyday environment.

It's not just the formula boycott

feeding bottle is the initial satisfaction of a woman's aspirations to the bourgeois standard of living of the industrial societies," writes one doctor. In the hope of having just a taste of that life, poor women in developing countries are said to sacrifice anywhere from 10 to 80 per cent of the average wage. That is what it costs to raise a child on infant formula.

Poor women, say boycotters, are often virtually snared into using infant formula by Nestle's tricks, such as free sampling. Nestle is known to distribute free samples of infant formula to new mothers through hospital systems in developing countries. Mothers who try the formula and decide to keep on using it, discover after a few cans that the scheme is just too expensive. They

is aimed at only five percent of Third World mothers: those living in cities, who can afford to buy the formula and need it because they work. Hallman says destitute people abound in the cities as well as in the country, and when Nestle promotes its products to city dwellers, the message also reaches the poor.

When Nestle reports that infant mortality in the cities of the developing world has dropped by about 50 per cent in the last 30 years and in the same breath repeats that it is in the cities where infant formula is most widely used, boycotters laugh cynically. The drop in infant mortality, they say, is a factor of improved health care and has nothing to do with the use of formula.

The fact that infant formula cans are somehow finding their way to the shelves of stores in rural poverty stricken areas, incenses boycott supporters. Formula is completely alien to this environment, they say, where people definitely can't afford it,

On the contrary, when the baby is first fed the contaminated food he will eat all his life, the immunizing qualities of his mother's milk may save his life.

Another Nestle claim is that studies done to compare the health of bottle-fed versus breast-fed babies are inaccurate because they don't consider what went into the bottle. The company maintains that bottles may contain "raw local milk of a doubtful quality, perhaps from diseased cows and goats, and not infant formula or even other processed milk products." In India, only one per cent of all milk used as a breast milk supplement is commercially processed. The other 99 per cent is raw milk.

Nestle digs its own grave on this issue, according to Hallman. If the bottles are filled with raw contaminated milk it is only because mothers started out using formula, found they couldn't afford it, and had no choice but to fill it with impure animal milk just to get something into the stomachs of

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groups like the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFAC) and the International Food Action Network (IBFAN) object to so violently. Formula, they say, is a lifesaver for children whose mothers are biologically incapable of breast feeding or for those left orphaned early in life. But this group is very small. Meanwhile Nestle rakes in About \$500 million a year from its Third

are then forced to stretch out the life of each can of formula by over-diluting it with water since by that time their breast milk has dried up. The result is an undernourished child. A child with a good chance of starving to death.

These, INFAC maintains, are just a couple of the ways Nestle is helping to kill babies.