
Formula for Funding

Dana Raphael's Westport-based Human Lactation Center and the "bottle vs. breastfeeding" controversy

By Fred Clarkson

For over five years, the Nestle Boycott has focused world attention on an international health problem that UNICEF estimates costs a million infant lives a year. The boycott calls on Nestle and other multinational infant formula companies to halt the aggressive sales promotion of "breast milk substitutes" in Third World countries.

Industry critics charge that sales campaigns have led to dramatic increases in bottle feeding in areas of deep poverty, illiteracy, and unclean water supplies. Because it can cost as much as 75 percent of the family income, people often overdilute the expensive milk powder to make it last. This leads to malnutrition, frequently complicated by diarrhea and other diseases. The tragedy is that many of the mothers could have breastfed, or breastfed longer.

Reforms have been made by both industry and governments since the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted an international Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in 1981. Even Nestle, which bitterly opposed it, now supports the Code, but so far has not fully put its provisions into practice in the field. The Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT) says the boycott will continue until Nestle goes all the way.

Throughout the controversy, Dana Raphael, director of the Human Lactation Center in Westport, has been a leading academic defender of the infant formula industry—in numerous public forums throughout the world, and in her occasional *Lactation Review*, which the industry buys in bulk and distributes to deflect criticism.

In 1978, Raphael appeared alongside Nestle executives debating against the boycott, first at the National Council of Churches and, two days later, at Notre Dame University. In 1980 she published distorted reports on the proposed WHO Code, and similar attacks against the final version in 1981. She has been hailed by the industry as an "independent authority" and

treated similarly when speaking publicly to professional groups or being quoted in the press.

However, from mid-1977 to mid-1981, the Center received nearly three-fourths of its income from the infant formula industry, according to the Center's own tax statements. This despite the fact that Raphael has long maintained that the Center does not accept such funding.

Policy Statements

The Human Lactation Center (HLC) was founded in 1975 as a non-profit educational and research organization. In 1976-77, HLC conducted a study for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the main "foreign aid" arm of the government. The AID grant accounted for almost all of the HLC's income for the period. However, in a letter to Reverend Douglas W. Gray of Fulton, NY, dated January 26, 1979, Raphael asserted that when the AID study was completed in 1977, "none of the transnational companies were as much as members of the Center. After this report was published, several of them contacted me and subsequently a few of them have subscribed. . . it has been our policy not to accept research grants from the transnational (infant food) companies. . . ." Raphael made no mention of the \$21,000 from Nestle in FY 1977, but this was 76.5 percent of the Center's income after the AID money ran out.

Raphael says the Nestle money was for purchase of publications. In the previous year, HLC sold only \$428.25 worth of publications. But in the following year, FY 1978, HLC sold \$9,000 worth of its magazines to Bristol Myers, representing 25 percent of the Center's income. (Many more publications, including the Center's newsletter, were apparently sold to other companies; publications represented \$33,000 of the \$36,000 income that year.)

Nestle was one major customer. The company passed out thousands of copies of the 1978 *Lactation Review* to delegates at the annual convention of the National Organization for Women (NOW) that year in an unsuccessful effort to thwart their endorsement of the Nestle Boycott.

Thus, when Raphael wrote to her board on November 20, 1978, she may have had good reason to anticipate future sales to the industry: "Lee Edson, a *New York Times Magazine* writer, has agreed to write a history of the breast/bottle controversy for us and we will put that out in a *Lactation Review*. I am guessing that the infant formula companies will want to buy this and distribute it widely." Buy it they did, as it took the HLC view that the industry had little effect on infant feeding practices in the Third World. Bristol Myers, for example, was using it to lobby against a bill introduced in Congress (June 1979) by California Democrats George Miller and Ronald Dellums. The bill sought to control the overseas sales practices of the three American corporations' infant formula subsidiaries: Abbott Laboratories (Ross), Bristol Myers (Mead-Johnson), and American Home Products (Wyeth).

Conflict of Interest?

Dellums wrote in the *Congressional Record* (July 25, 1979) that Raphael's memo "suggests a very strong possibility of a compromising conflict of interest situation." Raphael shot back with a letter (August 23, 1979) calling Dellums' statement "a personal attack on my credibility. This is serious." She continued, "I call your attention to the Supreme Court ruling [that denied] Congressional immunity to delame someone based on speculation or opinion. . . ." In her rebuttal, which Dellums inserted in the *Record* (Dec. 18, 1979), she charged: "You have used my words out of context to fashion a fantasy world of conflict-of-interest situations. You

attempt, by subtle nuance, to cast doubt on my credibility because I advised an infant food company (Nesle) on the scientific aspects of a film. . . . There was no 'cloaking of our advocacy efforts' as you claim. Nesle identifies all of us quite openly at the end of the film. Contrary to your suspicions, neither the Center nor I personally took a fee for my counsel, only travel expenses. It has been a policy of the Center not to take funds from the infant formula companies." She conceded that "Some companies did buy several thousand copies of this issue. . . and are distributing them." Whatever her motives, purchase of HLC publications by four infant formula companies accounted for 94 percent of the Center's income for FY 1979.

Miles Pennybacker, a Westport businessman, supporter of public interest causes, and HLC board member during this period, says that the members of the HLC board had neither the abilities nor responsibility for fundraising, but that Raphael had tried to get funding from government and foundations, but failed. As for the resulting pattern of funding, he conceded that the Center "may have been unconsciously bought, but certainly not consciously." He is sure that the *Lactation Review* is "written without consulting with the industry."

Dana Raphael, asked about allegations of formula industry funding, insisted to me that the Center receives no funds from the industry. When the amount of income generated from sales of publications to industry was pointed out, she said that that was the only income derived from the infant formula industry. But when confronted with the 1980 Bristol-Myers Foundation "grant" as distinct from "sale of publications," she asked to be sent a list of written questions (see sidebar).

Strangely enough, Raphael, a Ph.D. anthropologist, was an early critic of the industry for its Third World sales campaigns. In 1973, she said that "A growing trend away from breastfeeding infants and towards the use of artificial milk or animal milk is resulting in increased malnutrition and death." But in 1978, she published a retraction in the *Lactation Review*, saying that "this was an unscientific and inaccurate statement from an individual assuming an advocate's role based on the statements of others and her own limited impressions."

Despite Raphael's frequent claims to the contrary, there is solid documentation of a decline in breastfeeding in many parts of the world, as well as serious health problems related to bottle feeding. The percentage of babies from low-income families in Singapore, for example, who were breastfed at least three months, dropped from 71 percent to 42 percent between 1951 and 1960. By 1971, only five percent of infants were still being breastfed at three months. A 1973 study in Chile showed that there were three times as many deaths among babies given bottles before the age of three months as among those babies who were only breastfed.

In addition to the risks of mis-use of formula, Third World infants deprived of breastmilk are also deprived of the immunological resistance to infections provided by human milk. The human body, like that of other mammals, transforms the diet of the mother into 'milk' uniquely adapted to the nutritional and immunological needs of the growing infant. Human milk protects against a variety of illnesses, including respiratory infections and, of great importance to the Third World, gastro-intestinal disease. *The Journal of Tropical Pediatrics* editorialized last year that "research has now firmly established the mammary gland as an important organ of the immune system."

Canadian pediatrician Elizabeth Hillman is one of many health workers who have coped with the problem first-hand. "We observed a decline in breastfeeding in our two sojourns in Kenya (1969-71 and 1974-76). The problem was worst among the urban people. We were extremely concerned. . . as we saw the result: an increase in diarrhea and marasmus (severe malnutrition). It was glaringly apparent that the babies with gastroenteritis, particularly those with severe gastroenteritis, were bottlefed." The formula companies, she said, "are largely responsible" for the problem. About \$2 billion worth of formula is sold every year in the Third World, and sales are growing by 15 to 25 percent annually.

Most of the world may have come around to Dr. Hillman's conclusion, but Dana Raphael's views have increasingly converged with industry. She concludes that the decline in breastfeeding has not been great, that formula has not been much misused, and that industry sales campaigns have not been that much of a factor.

Raphael wrote to Joseph Short of the anti-hunger organization Oxfam-America in 1978 that "the multinational milk companies are irrelevant to the issue. . . . Many of us believed that (they) . . . were enticing Third World women to bottlefeed and that this was damaging the health of their children. We, in our innocence, expected that if we got rid of the milk companies, child health would improve." This, however, was not being argued. Industry critics are not trying "to get rid of" the infant formula companies, and readily acknowledge that the industry is not the only factor in the problem, just one that could be easily controlled, particularly if industry cooperated.

Infant formula activists believe that matters of choice cannot be reduced to competing consumer products, but that real choices will come from removing the obstacles to breastfeeding in society, in the hospitals, and in employment. No one I've talked to or whose work I've read proposes a world without formula or other commercial baby foods.

The Bristol-Myers Connection

The entanglements between the Human Lactation Center and the industry are many. Since 1977, the pattern has been for the industry to purchase bulk quantities of the *Lactation Review*; the proceeds in turn finance the next issue (there has generally been one per year) and allow Raphael to cover travel expenses when airing her views. She does not actually receive a salary from HLC.

The fiscal year 1980-81 marked a new form of involvement, during a critical period in the controversy. HLC received a \$67,000 (77 percent of its income) from the Bristol-Myers Foundation, all of whose trustees are on the board of the Bristol Myers Company.

However, a large fraction of the Bristol Myers money carried over into FY 1981. This is significant because in the fall of 1981, Frances Stout, a nutritionist who worked on the *Lactation Review* in 1979 and 1980, was hired onto a Bristol Myers public relations team and sent out to attack the Code. Industry sources indicate she generated a good deal of radio, TV and newspaper attention.

Bristol Myers' investment in the anti-Code HLC, and the hiring of the HLC's Frances Stout, thus assured the financial solvency of the HLC, and the use of whatever credibility Stout could project as a former HLC employee.

Stout's Atlanta press release claimed that the Code "will not solve the problem of infant malnutrition in the Third World," but "infringes on a freedom women have always enjoyed—the option to supplement breastfeeding if they wish to, or even decide whether or not to breastfeed." The Code, of course, was not intended to solve all infant malnutrition, and the second argument is indistinguishable from Raphael's views. In a radio debate on WRFG in Atlanta (Feb. 17, 1982) Stout described herself as an "advisor to the Bristol Myers company on infant nutrition," while Rev. Charles Mingle of INFACT says that she might be better described as a "hired gun" or a "mercenary for Bristol Myers."

"We Never Studied That"

I asked Raphael how her views differ from health workers who have spent decades in developing countries. She agrees overdilution of formula with contaminated water is possible, and would certainly pose health problems, and concedes that her view might differ only in degree. How much of a problem is it? "I couldn't tell you, we never studied that." Asked about the many studies on health problems related to bottle-feeding, she said she "discounts" most of them, and added, "we don't yet have any good data." Asked then how she might explain the perceptions of pediatricians who see the problem daily, she said: "I don't know, I wouldn't know where to begin. Sure there are dying babies, but I can't tell you what they're dying of. People have to get easy answers to everything."

Three Clues

Last October, Raphael spoke to an AAP seminar on the promotion of breastfeeding, attended by several hundred pediatricians, on the theme of why some women fail at breastfeeding. Essentially, Raphael believes that social support for the mother, and understanding of the limits of human milk supply, are the key to providing a helpful, warm situation for the new mother, with no pressures to create unnecessary anxiety. She offered "three clues" towards understanding lactation failure.

"Twenty-seven and a half years and two weeks ago I had a personal failure at breastfeeding and that catapulted me . . . into a study of what factors were related to lactation success or failure," she said. Her findings about the social support often necessary for lactation are widely respected. In most cultures, a close female relative is present to help in the hours and weeks after delivery. Raphael calls this figure the "doula," and her absence can lead to breastfeeding problems (clue #1).

HLC's AID-funded anthropological study of infant feeding patterns in 11 cultures found that in some places additional fluids were being given as early as two weeks, and solids as early as one month, with a general increase in solids around age three months (clue #2). Based on this, Raphael objects to "an unnatural emphasis on breastfeeding, and considers "mixed feeding" to be normal. Several researchers interviewed agree that it is common for a variety of liquids and foods to be introduced at a variety of ages. They do not believe that

these are necessary, or necessarily harmful. Where they part company with Raphael is over the spread of bottle-feeding, with its accompanying problems of hygiene and probable misuse. They say that while infant food promotion is seldom the sole factor influencing infant feeding decisions, if marketing has persuaded people that formula is just as good or almost the same as breastmilk, the decision to bottlefeed can become an established routine—it is always easier for a baby to draw from a bottle than suck from a breast. And some babies refuse to breast-feed after bottlefeeding.

Less digestible supplements to breast-feeding, introduced too much, too soon, can also interfere with the baby's hunger cycles. Since human milk production is dependent on frequent nipple stimulation, there may be less stimulation and milk production falls off.

Raphael cites the work of British scientist Roger Whitehead, which suggests that human milk production "levels off at about age three months, and declines after six months." She says this offers a "physiological explanation" for the HLC findings (clue #3).

World scientific consensus is that humans need no additional foods for four to six months, with continued breastfeeding for as long as practical. There is another minority view, supported by recent studies, that exclusive breastfeeding might support normal growth for as much as six to nine months. Raphael doesn't mention any of this, nor does she mention Roger Whitehead's long relationship with Nestle, his membership on the board of the Nestle Foundation, and Nestle funding of his work.

Survival of the Center

Dana Raphael seems to be genuinely and deeply moved by the situation of women in developing countries. She has devoted a lot of time trying to help, and does not appear to have gotten rich from her work. She has tried, apparently without success, to persuade the industry to produce nutritious low-cost weaning foods—which are chronically needed. More importantly, she has made some valuable contributions to the understanding of maternal needs and infant feeding practices.

However, Raphael has also misled the public about the nature and extent of the relationship between the infant formula industry and the Human Lactation Center. While publicly attacking industry critics and the WHO Code in speeches and her writings, she has relied on income from the infant formula industry for the survival of the Center. The industry, in turn, has used the apparent independence of the HLC as a tool in their public relations arsenal.

Premeditation isn't a necessary prerequisite for conflict of interest. Sometimes it just turns out that way.

Raphael Replies

The *Advocate* sent Dana Raphael a list of specific questions about the Human Lactation Center's funding. Only some were directly answered. "You will find that all our work and my public statements pursue one clear path," she wrote. "Our policy remains akin to what Margaret Mead cautioned when we first discussed the ramifications of selling our publications to the infant formula industry. She said, 'Make sure this is the clearest representation of women's lot that it could possibly be.'"

Asked about the \$66,000 Bristol-Myers grant received in FY '80, Raphael replied: "This non-profit foundation, whose funds support scientific, medical and public health objectives, provided a grant which allowed the Center staff to organize the field data obtained under the original AID grant and write the results in a book manuscript which will be published in 1984 and have the imprint (sic) of a major publisher."

Raphael declined to provide requested financial information for FY 1981 and '82, suggesting that we "obtain this information in the same manner that (we) used for the (previous) years."

In FY 1977-'78, HLC received 76.5 percent of its income from the infant formula industry. In FY '78-'79 the figure was 25 percent; in '79-'80 it was 94 percent, and in '80-'81 it was 74 percent.



A poster aimed at Third World women encourages breastfeeding.

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