

## The side of life

(Edited version of a talk delivered at the swearing-in ceremonies for new midwives held yesterday at the Manila Hotel.)

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR INVITING ME TO address all of you, newly licensed midwives, as well as your families, friends and supporters. Thank you for devoting your precious time at this momentous occasion in your lives to listen to a journalist and a women's advocate. Some of you may have expected to hear from a healthcare professional or an expert in your field of midwifery. I hope that what I have to say will at least be of some inspiration, if not encouragement, to you.

I once wrote that midwives have often been viewed as handmaids to doctors and nurses, not quite health professionals and sometimes even considered little better than nursemaids. And yet, if an honest evaluation of your work and importance to society is done, we would all realize that midwives play a crucial role in the health-delivery system of this country.

Along with barangay health workers, midwives form the frontline of the healthcare system. It is you who "woman" health centers, who deal first-hand with mothers and their children, who provide information and services, especially in the care of expectant mothers and the delivery of babies.

Indeed, it could be said that you midwives are our mothers, mothers of our neighborhoods and communities, who look after our children's health and welfare, and who monitor and report on the health conditions of neighbors and clients to spot a public health problem before it escalates into a crisis.

Though often unheralded, you midwives play a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of a healthy society. You serve as a bridge between the lowly citizen and the often-impersonal and intimidating health system. So take a bow, newly minted midwives. You and the work you will be doing matter a lot!

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IT'S said that the health system in the Philippines is facing a crisis—if it isn't already in the midst of it. Apart from the lack of funds and re-

### 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 reaching unprecedented levels. Unfortunately, joining them are midwives, many of whom abandon their training and profession altogether to work as nursemaids or housemaids.

Some—or maybe many—of you will doubtless 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 doubtless 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, to 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?

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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 compromising 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 could mouth the various brands of infant 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, "politeness" prevented them from driving them away, so they would entertain the sales reps briefly and graciously accept the freebies they offered.

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

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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 decline 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 joys and benefits of breast-feeding. I hope you choose the right side—the side of life, the side of what is truly best for our babies.