



Elvira L. Hecenas-Esquerro, MD Children for Breastfeeding

## Natividad Relucio Clavano

Breastfeeding advocate and chief of paediatrics at Baguio General Hospital, Philippines. She was born in Manila, Philippines, on Oct 1, 1932, and died of a pulmonary illness, aged 76 years, in Manila on Oct 4, 2007.

In early 1974, Natividad Clavano travelled from her home in the Philippines to the UK, for postgraduate research into paediatric asthma. But when she arrived in London she found that her supervisor, Professor David Morley of the Institute for Child Health, had a different suggestion about what she should focus on. "In discussion with her, I got her interested in the problems of under-5s", Morley recalls. "I didn't have to convince her. I think she already had an understanding of the real problems of her country."

Those problems included infant mortality among the poor in the Philippines, where babies were routinely removed from their mothers at birth, placed in a nursery, and given infant formula. When Clavano returned home to Baguio City she decided to take action. As she described it later, she "closed the door of the nursery to the milk companies. We stopped giving our babies the starter dose of infant formula. Down came the colourful posters and calendars; in their place we hung the 'baby killer' posters which show an emaciated baby inside a dirty feeding bottle".

Clavano also began a study to compare mortality in infants born at Baguio General Hospital between 1973 and 1975, when formula feeding was the norm, with those born between 1975 and 1977, under a new regimen that allowed mothers and babies to room together, and encouraged

women to breastfeed on demand. The results were dramatic: the incidence of oral thrush, diarrhoea, clinical sepsis, and death were "drastically reduced during the intensification of the breastfeeding programme", she reported.

Breastfeeding activists cite Clavano's work as one of the scientific pillars of their movement. "Her work gave foundation to a global movement", says Patti Rundall, policy director of the group Baby Milk Action. Clavano also took on an international campaigning role, speaking at hearings such as a 1978 US Senate Inquiry under Senator Edward Kennedy. In 1981, 3 years later, the World Health Assembly adopted the landmark in consumer protection, the International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and began helping governments implement it.

Clavano was born into a wealthy family and graduated in medicine in 1957 from the University of Santo Tomas. She was physically small, but what she lacked in stature, she more than made up for in energy and strength of will, remembers Morley. "She was a really excellent advocate. Coming from the upper class in the Philippines, I think she found it easy to talk to people and travel and so forth."

Anwar Fazal, founder of the International Baby Food Action Network and other civil society groups, says the success of her intervention was inspiring. "Someone like her was a wonderful voice, a can-do spirit. Here was this little doctor stuck out on her own who had done it all", he said. "She was that living example, a model of how a doctor can actually change the world." Clavano's study also came to the attention of UNICEF's Executive Director Jim Grant, Morley says, and contributed to the formation of the organisation's Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, which encourages hospitals not to accept free or low-cost breastmilk substitutes, feeding bottles, or teats and to support breastfeeding.

At home in the Philippines, Clavano continued to advocate against the use of infant formulas, work that contributed to the 1986 Philippine National Milk Code, and the 1992 Rooming-In and Breastfeeding Act that required the state to "create an environment where the basic physical, emotional, and psychological needs of mothers and infants are fulfilled through the practice of rooming-in and breastfeeding". Inez Fernandez, a breastfeeding consultant who worked with Clavano in the Philippines calls her a fighter. "She was a person who was not afraid of formula companies or whoever. She spoke out for what she saw and what she knew was wrong", she says.

In 2006, Clavano was awarded the Order of the Golden Heart with rank of Commander from President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo for her work in paediatrics and infant feeding and for her Under-Five Clinic National Program. She is survived by her husband Dodong, three sons, Greg, Guido, and Graf, and two grandchildren.

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See Clavano N. Mode of feeding and its effect on infant mortality and morbidity. *J Trop Ped* 1982; 28: 287-93.