

# Natividad Relucio-Clavano

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## Paediatrician and breastfeeding pioneer

Health campaigners around the globe are mourning the death, at the age of 75, of Dr Natividad Relucio-Clavano, the Filipina paediatrician whose research demonstrated the damaging impact that western medical practices can have on breastfeeding and child survival.

Clavano was born in Manila, the daughter of a businessman, and graduated in medicine from the University of Santo Tomas in 1957. Seventeen years later, her life took a dramatic turn when she came to London for postgraduate paediatric studies at the Institute of Child Health, London University. Initially keen to learn about asthma, she studied under Professor David Morley, who opened her eyes to a more urgent – and preventable – problem facing the underprivileged in her country.

One aspect of the western medical model then standard practice in the Philippines – and throughout much of the developing world – involved routinely removing babies from their mothers at birth, after which they were placed in a nursery and formula-fed – with supplies happily provided by the milk companies. But by the time Clavano arrived in London, consumer protests about these practices had begun. Morley and Professor Ralph Hendrickse, of the Liverpool school of tropical medicine, had been interviewed in the *New Internationalist*. The *War on Want* report, *The Baby Killer*, had been translated into German as *Nestlé Kills Babies*, and this had prompted Nestlé to sue for libel in Switzerland. The Swiss Third World Action Group was fined a token amount, but Nestlé was told to change its marketing approach.

Clavano returned home armed with helpful information about how to change hospital practices. She said that she had closed the door of the nursery to the milk companies and stopped giving babies the starter dose of infant formula milk. "Down came the colour-

ful posters and calendars," she said. "In their place we hung the 'baby killer' posters which show an emaciated baby inside a dirty feeding bottle."

When Limer Clavano in 1989 – as coordinator of Baby Milk Action, in Manila to celebrate 10 years of International Baby Food Action there – she stressed the need to retain medical and nursing staff, many had not seen fully breastfed babies and mistook normal breastfed stools for diarrhoea. Most importantly, she also documented the results of her actions. Her study of 10,000 babies born in the Baguio general hospital between 1973 and 1977 showed that rooming in (keeping mothers and babies together) and demand breastfeeding (rather than feeding to a rigid timetable) increased breastfeeding rates from 40% to 87%, and reduced the rates of diarrhoea by 94% and death by 95%.

Clavano, who became head of paediatrics at Baguio hospital, continued to campaign against the formula companies. In 1978, she spoke to a US senate inquiry, chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy, which demanded that the World Health Organisation tackle the



Relucio-Clavano closed the nursery door on formula milk companies

question of aggressive marketing. In 1981, the World Health Assembly adopted an international code on the marketing of breast-milk substitutes, and Iblan began helping governments to implement it. In 1986, President Corason Aquino signed into law the Philippines national milk code.

Concerned about continuing aggressive marketing, in 2005 Clavano addressed a milk-code inquiry set up by the Philippines senate; a supreme court decision last month upheld many of the controls she fought for. She also helped to set up the Unicef Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative and its Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding, an initiative that is transforming hospital practices in 192 countries. Last year she was made a commander of the Order of the Golden Heart by the Philippines president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

She is survived by her husband, Dodong, and three sons.  
**Patti Rundall**

*Natividad Relucio-Clavano, paediatrician, born October 1 1932; died October 4 2007*