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DANGEROUS DIPLOMACY

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The World Health Organization's (WHO) annual spring meeting in Geneva attracts thousands of leading global health experts and representatives from nearly 200 national governments. They convene, share research findings and collaborate to identify initiatives that the international community can adopt to improve health outcomes worldwide. It is multilateralism on a grand scale with the potential to save millions of lives.

In the face of this positive, collegial environment, it was shocking to hear revelations this week that the United States government's delegation to the meeting aggressively opposed long-established, evidence-based, life-saving public health initiatives. Hard scientific evidence shows that breast feeding saves children's lives and impacts many other positive outcomes for child health and beyond. It is not the case, as President Trump tweeted on June 9, that infant formula is needed because many infants are poor and malnourished. This is the population that precisely needs breastfeeding promotion to prevent morbidity and mortality, as decades of research has shown. This antiscience stance clearly belies not so subtle support of corporate infant formula companies at the cost of infant health and harkens back to the tobacco industry's lies about the damaging health sequelae of smoking. Furthermore, according to numerous sources, the US bullied and blackmailed a much smaller country to cave into their position.

Ecuador introduced a motion at the meeting supporting breast feeding. According to the medical journal the Lancet, it is estimated that universal breast-feeding would save 800,000 children's lives per year and \$300 billion through reduced healthcare costs and improved economic activity. With 40 years of medical evidence to support this effort, who would oppose the promotion of breast feeding? Apparently, President Trump's administration does. The US delegation allegedly threatened Ecuador with trade sanctions and the withdrawal of crucial US military aid if they did not withdraw the motion (they did). The US delegation was reported to also trying to prevent low-income countries from accessing life-saving essential medications, attempting to block countries from being able to restrict products that harm young children, and even threatening to withhold US funding from the WHO. This, at a time when the relatively new director general Dr. Tedros is working very hard to reform the organization to more effectively deliver on its mandate to 'build a better, healthier future for people all over the world'.

This approach, to bully and blackmail nations into adopting positions that fly in the face of long standing scientific evidence, not only undermines the US's relationships with the international community but also compromises everyone's health. As we have seen with the Ebola and Zika viruses, diseases are blind to borders. Supporting positions that fly in the face of medical evidence and wielding diplomatic power like an axe to support those positions is lethal. It makes us all vulnerable.

The United States has been the international leader in global health for decades. It has used its diplomatic power to forge international consensus around big global health challenges and backed this up with technical assistance and funds. Some of the results have been awe inspiring and have saved millions of people from an early death or life long disability. President George W Bush's PEPFAR initiative has provided millions of people infected with HIV access to affordable, life-saving anti-retroviral medications; US public servants across USAID, Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, NIH, HHS, State and the Defense departments worked tirelessly, often risking their lives, to stop the deadly Ebola Virus outbreak in West Africa; and President Jimmy Carter's efforts, in collaboration with the WHO, CDC, UNICEF and many African and Asian ministries of health are close to driving the extremely debilitating Guinea worm to extinction. This is US global health diplomacy at its finest: collaborating with the international community to scale up evidence-based health initiatives that save lives, including in the US, and strengthen national security.

The US government's destructive actions at the WHO contravenes the global health diplomacy exercised by previous US presidents from both parties. Those leaders understood that we live in an interdependent world, including for health. We work together, or we sink together. That is the reality of the 21st century.

President Trump needs to take a leaf from his predecessor's global health playbooks: follow the evidence and work collaboratively to improve global health outcomes. If he does this everyone will benefit, including the United States.

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The Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) is a Washington, DC based, non-profit organization of over 171 academic institutions and other organizations from around the world. It is the world's largest consortium of academic institutions addressing global health challenges across research, education, service and advocacy. www.cugh.org