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THE COLUMN

by Mike Erickson

Being pro-business I am distressed lately by the refusal of some major companies to accept responsibility for their actions until they are made to by government. And then the companies complain about "regulation", when in fact they have only themselves to blame.

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Last week there came in the mails a news memo from PG&E's Public Information Department which read: "Under the pressures of deadlines, it is often easy to fall into a kind of shorthand description of things or events. We particularly have in mind the linking by newspeople of the adjective 'cancer-causing' to the toxic substance PCB. Such a link may be suspected by some experts, but it has not been established. In fact, the opposite is indicated in the attached news release from Monsanto. In case you may not have seen it, I am sending you a copy of the release. There are a number of adjectives that can accurately be applied to PCBs, but cancer-causing or 'lethal' are not among them. Even so, PG&E is removing PCBs from our environment as fast as possible."

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On or about August 25th of 1981 there was a huge PCB mess in San Francisco. What is interesting to note is that the press release of Monsanto Chemical Company is dated August 27th of 1981. The Monsanto document reads as follows: "New York: August 27th - An extensive scientific review of more than two dozen health studies dealing with human exposures to PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls) fails to show a link between the chemical and human cancer. The findings were presented today at the National Meeting of the American Chemical Society by Dr. William R. Gaffey, Manager of Epidemiology at Monsanto Company. Dr. Gaffey who conducted the review of the independent epidemiologic studies said that while they have shown that exposure to PCBs can cause temporary skin problems, there are no clinically observable long-term health effects, including the occurrence of cancer. The one fact on which all occupational studies of health effects agree is that there has been no clinical illness associated with PCB exposure other than dermatitis (skin disorder). Dr. Gaffey said studies of non-occupationally exposed populations have found neither dermatitis nor other clinical evidence of exposure-related effects."

The two page press release ends with the notation that production of PCBs was banned by the EPA in 1979.

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Having an Army friend who served as a Major in Vietnam and having seen firsthand the effects of Agent Orange Contaminant Dioxin on his family (Upon his return home from combat duty he and his wife had two still-born limbless and deformed children), I am very concerned about them and other decent people who are exposed to these hazardous chemical. Major corporations appear to spend little time investigating the effects of the chemicals upon the public, BEFORE they manufacture and use them. And PCBs WERE (as the Monsanto press release admits) used in schools, high-rise buildings and even hospitals. Dow Chemical initially tried to scoff at the Vietnam Veterans, and one PR official charged that these combat veterans were "a bunch of communist agitators". The Veterans Administration, under pressure from the big chemical industry lobby in Washington, tries to avoid doing its share of providing full medical care for all those who have been exposed to Dioxin/Agent Orange. Former soldiers with limited financial resources are told by the VA "PROVE it." And of course they are fully aware that most veterans have little clout. The chemical companies say much the same thing...and the utilities which use PCBs it seems. The citizens (ordinary people like you and me) are told "PROVE the link between PCBs and cancer." And the utilities quote chemical companies PR releases as showing the opposite.

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Now the release from Monsanto was most impressive. If used at face value, (and let's face it, most newspapers don't have time to dig around) it looks like a highly qualified medical doctor is talking about the impact of a chemical substance on the human body. The term "Doctor" is used and re-used in the PR sheet by Monsanto. The release implies that this is a medically competent man whose specialty is medicine and epidemics. Not being one to take things for granted, I called around a few places and this is the response I got:

SPOKESWOMAN FOR MONSANTO IN ST. LOUIS: "Dr. Gaffey - a medical doctor? I don't really know. I know he is in charge of Monsanto's Epidemiology Department.

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION SPOKESMAN: "No. We have no Dr. William R. Gaffey on our roster."

SPOKESMAN FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY RESEARCH DEPARTMENT: "There is a William R. Gaffey listed, but he does not appear to be a medical doctor. This one holds a Ph.D in Mathematical Statistics from U.C. Berkeley."

SPOKESWOMAN FOR MONSANTO: "Yes. It is true that Dr. Gaffey is a statistician and has no direct medical background." Asked if Dr. Gaffey had practiced medicine at any time, the spokeswoman for Monsanto said "he had not".

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Now all of this, of course, does not imply that Dr. Gaffey is fake or anything like that. What is being pointed out is that chemical companies and utilities (in my opinion) - in their anxiety to avoid their fair share of responsibilities for blame for damages done - are grasping at straws. Statisticians are passed off in press releases as "Doctors". Technically this is true. Dr. Gaffey IS a doctor but of STATISTICS not medicine! He is, in my opinion, as competent to judge the merits of PCBs and Dioxin as a bricklayer. And that was basically the input I received when I brought the matter to the attention of an independent study group (a non-profit and unbiased study group) called The

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Scientists Institute for Public Information located at 355 Lexington Avenue in New York City (NYC 10017). This organization's director, Michael Jacobs, referred me to three very reputable and very real MEDICAL DOCTORS, all of whom are working on research into PCBs and Dioxin. These are: Dr. Edward Baker of Harvard Medical School, 617-732-1200; Dr. J. O'Connor of New York University, 914-961-5419; and Dr. H.B. Mathews of the National Institute of Environmental Health, 919-544-3884. I have arranged to send copies of this column to them and other interested parties to find out as much as possible about PCBs and Dioxin and will do my best to give you the data; good, bad or indifferent.

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As a newspaper writer I feel "tricked" by Monsanto and PG&E's portrayal of Dr. Gaffey. By this I mean that nowhere in the actual press release is Dr. Gaffey identified fully as a statistician. There are a few law firms who have Ph.D's for Office Managers but that doesn't make them lawyers or able to comment adequately on the procedures of the legal profession. I too could set up an "Epidemiology Office" but it does not mean that my "findings" would be anymore or less valid than the average layman's. Certainly my findings would be less valid than a doctor who had devoted his entire energies to studying human victims of Dioxin or PCBs, outside of the influence of the chemical companies making those toxic chemicals and outside of the reach of the utilities using them.

When I phoned PG&E's Public Information Officer and asked him if he knew Dr. Gaffey was merely a statistician, the PG&E spokesman said "Yes" and that he saw "nothing wrong" with presenting "another viewpoint". I told him that my opinion was totally unfavorable of the matter; that I felt it was deceitful to say the least to quote a statistician and appear to pass him off as a medical practitioner.

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The terrible thing about all this is that these "Doctors" statements are used in Congressional testimony. Congressmen and Senators "assume" that when a "Doctor" talks about medical matters as serious as Agent Orange, Dioxin or PCBs the "Doctor" is a MEDICAL doctor. It is his title which gives the report its clout. He is looked to as "an expert" an "authority". Veterans are being denied proper medical care and benefits because of these kinds of situations. Victims of PCBs exposure may find themselves denied adequate medical attention or compensation for the long term effects of exposure to PCB - merely on the basis of such statisticians' reports.

Human beings are NOT mere statistics and we owe our veterans who have been exposed to Agent Orange Dioxin much much more than platitudes and telling them their problems are "all in the mind".

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