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THE REGULATION ISSUE:

Policies on carcinogens scored

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Staff Reporter

If regulation of carcinogens is to become a reality, don't count on the medical profession, government or the petrochemical industries to help the situation along, said Samuel Epstein at the annual Kaiser Lecture at Yale's Harkness Hall last week.

"The Politics of Cancer" is Epstein's 1978 book about how government, the scientific and medical professions and the chemical industry deal with the prevention of cancer. He feels their efforts aren't very good.

"It is clear that we are dealing with a major killing disease," Epstein said, "and the actual causes have crystallized into two schools of thought.

"The first is the lifestyle school of thought, which states it's your own fault if you get cancer, because you either drink or smoke too much or chose the wrong parents."

The second is the occupational and industrial school of thought. This says that cancer is caused by overwhelming exposure to carcinogens.

"The medical community has taken the lifestyle school as their reason for cancer. They believe that it's your own fault and that there hasn't been a significant increase in the cancer rate," Epstein said. "They feel that if you do get cancer it's

due to smoking, and that is why there is no need to control carcinogens.

"There is evidence that smoking is a cause of lung cancer. But it also shows up more in major chemical-industrial areas," he said. "The rate is increasing among non-smokers, too, because the carcinogens are getting into the air.

"In 1978, the industries were asking the Carter administration, 'Do we really need to regulate?' The government did some studies that showed if certain carcinogens (five or six were tested) were continued to be emitted, that 38 percent of cancer in the coming decades would be caused by the carcinogens," Epstein said.

"Industry's problem is its unwillingness to recognize the existence of cancer-causing carcinogens," he said. "Industry attributes risk to the lifestyle school."

Some of the major companies have been suppressing, manipulating and destroying information about their hazardous chemicals, Epstein claimed.

"The record speaks for itself," he said, "These constraints in their data base are quasi-criminal acts. But the record of manipulation is not a simple matter to explain. It is very complicated."

The industry's concern is with the cost-benefit analysis that is conducted before any regulations are passed. Companies look at the cost of complying with the

federal regulations, which they usually feel is too expensive. What they don't look at is the long-range benefits of the regulations, Epstein said.

"Benefits would include improved industrial efficiency by recycling and recovering the chemicals instead of putting them in the air," Epstein said. "They ignore the delayed benefits of not damaging the ecosystems and not promoting the disease any further."

The Reagan administration has a different policy toward regulations than the Carter administration, Epstein said.

"There is an overwhelming paradox in returning the power to the states and getting government off their backs," he said. "There has been an attack on freedom of information and the fundamental rights of the citizens.

"Carter's labor law said that workers should be told what the nature of the chemicals that they were working with was," Epstein said. "In 1981, Reagan's administration put up a notice inviting the public to give comments on the law. The chemical industry was so outraged at the request that they lobbied successfully for the notice to be withdrawn."

The public must realize that its concern about regulation must be transformed into a political movement. The only way to get through to government is through politics, Epstein concluded.

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