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SAFETY & HEALTH

Doctors say cancer is a bum rap for industry

Specialists say the federal focus should be on smoking and alcohol—not pollutants

In the federal government's war on cancer, industry has been identified as the major enemy. Over the past several years, laws and regulations have ordered companies to reduce the amounts of suspected cancer-causing substances that they discharge into the air, water, and workplace. But many physicians and health professionals are becoming concerned that these government programs, while well-intentioned, are misdirected and will fail to achieve any appreciable reduction in cancer deaths.

"The country cannot afford to spend vast amounts of money to chase the wrong culprit in cancer incidence," says Dr. Harry B. Demopoulos, a pathologist with the New York University School of Medicine. Instead, Demopoulos and other health officials believe that more attention should be focused on the personal habits of individuals, because, they say, there is medical evidence that certain practices can contribute significantly to the cancer death rate. Such habits include smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and poor nutrition.

Consumer responsibility. Because of the economics involved, the issue of assessing what is to blame for cancer is controversial, and the philosophy espoused by these medical people has heated up the debate. If heavy industries such as steel and chemicals are made to bear the burden of cancer prevention, it means that they must continue to install expensive equipment to control the emissions of suspected carcinogens and other air pollutants. If the finger is pointed at cigarettes, liquor, or foods high in fat, the manufacturers of those products will undoubtedly lose sales.

More important, this new philosophy is causing a stir because it leaves the greatest responsibility for preventing cancer with the consumer. "It's easier for the public to blame smokestacks rather than themselves as the causes of cancer," says Demopoulos. Indeed, health officials who have blamed personal habits have been severely criticized by the press, government officials, and other members of the health profession. In an extreme case, New Jersey State Senator John M. Skevin asked the state's attorney general to investigate Elizabeth M. Whelan, a research associate from the Harvard School of Public Health, who founded the American Council on Science & Health.

Whelan's group has argued that there is little to connect so-called cancer clusters in New Jersey with industrial pollution. But Skevin has charged that the group is an industry "conspiracy" set up to blame all cancer on cigarettes, alcohol, and lack of exercise. Another of Whelan's statements—that National Cancer Institute data do not back up the common notion that there is a cancer epidemic—also was greeted with hostility and led to allegations in the press that she had accepted money from a foundation linked with industry. Actually, Whelan says, she has meticulously avoided accepting funds from industry but did take a grant of $100,000 from the Sarah Scaife Foundation in Pittsburgh, which owns considerable stock in Gulf Oil Corp. "It's a sad situation when you stand up and say there is no cancer epidemic, and you're labeled as an industry spokesman," she says.



Paul S. Conklin

Researcher Whelan: Under attack for debunking the notion that there is a cancer epidemic.

But many worry that such views as Whelan's understate the adverse impact that industrial activities may have on public health. "People cannot control whether the air is polluted or their clothes are treated with carcinogens," says Joseph H. Highland, a staff scientist with the Environmental Defense Fund. Dr. Anthony Robbins, director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety & Health, cautions: "We have to be careful that we are not implying to workers that all other hazards will go away if smoking is stopped."

But doctors are concerned that insufficient epidemiological data are increasingly being used to justify costly government rules. During a recent cancer symposium in New York attended by more than 200 health professionals, Dr. Merrill Eisenbud, professor of environmental medicine at NYU's School of Medicine, criticized the Environmental Protection Agency's costly requirement that cities install activated carbon to filter out trihalomethanes, suspected carcinogens, in drinking-water supplies. Trihalomethanes, he says, have been present in drinking water since the latter part of the 19th century, when chlorination began.

Questioning Califano. Under heavy attack by these health specialists is a statement made by Health, Education & Welfare Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. attributing at least 20% of all cancer to occupational causes. Demopoulos believes that closer to 5% of all cancer is caused by workplace conditions. The "real culprit" is cigarettes, he says, which may account for as much as 27% of cancer deaths each year. According to the NYU pathologist, National Cancer Institute data show that excessive alcohol consumption may be responsible for an additional 10% of all cancer deaths, while poor nutritional habits may account for as much as 40% of total cancer deaths.

Predictably, the heavy industries have been encouraged by these recent statements. And William J. McCarville, director of environmental affairs at Monsanto Co., says that such new views may have an impact on the enforcement of federal laws.

On the other hand, one of the main targets of this new philosophy, the tobacco industry, discounts these views. An official at the Tobacco Institute, an industry trade group, says that many industries have blamed their own problems on tobacco, and he repeats the tobacco industry's position that research linking smoking with cancer deaths is not conclusive. ■

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