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CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT
Union Carbide Corporation

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MEMORANDUM

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DATE: June 1, 1984

cc: E. S. Aldrich - D2-229
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The attached article from Journal of Communication (Winter, 1984) examines the accuracy, slant and thoroughness of news reports on cancer topics during selected periods in 1977 and 1980. The study was initiated by the National Cancer Institute's Office of Cancer Communications, with the aid of an assistant professor and doctoral student from the University of Maryland and the public relations firm, Porter, Novelli & Assoc. *

Results of the study pretty well confirm what chemical industry representatives and, lately, authors such as Edith Efron have claimed: news reports on cancer have placed far too much emphasis on cancer in the workplace, far too little emphasis on risk prevention, and virtually no emphasis on lifestyle decisions which can reduce a person's potential exposure.

* Now Needham, Porter & Novelli, Inc., having recently affiliated with Needham, Harper & Steers.

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Some points from the article:

- * In the 1980 study, over 50% of all stories reported on cancer experience in the work place. (Not surprising, since HEW Secretary Califano, in late 1978, reported on the "great workers' cancer epidemic".)
- * In that same study, only 7% of the stories discussed cancer related to cigarette smoking (Doll & Peto attribute 30% of all cancer incidence to cigarette smoking).
- * Fewer than 20% of the news reports ever bothered to provide perspective, i.e., comparing a specific cancer incidence rate with overall U.S. averages.
- * The science writing "community" is comprised of only 25-30 veteran journalists who can "substantially affect (news) coverage of cancer throughout the United States".

While gently slapping the wrists of news reporters and editors, the authors place most of the blame for any inaccurate or misleading stories in the laps of "science information specialists": communications personnel of government agencies and major health clinics responsible for interpreting and disseminating cancer-related news to the mass media.

It's pure speculation, but NCI may have shifted their communications gears a bit as a result of this study. Their treatment of news re "U.S. Cancer Mortality Rates and Trends, 1950-1979" has been relatively balanced and in perspective, as has their communications effort re "Cancer Awareness Week".

Let's see how they handle the color-coded maps.


W. E. Hoerger

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Attachment

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