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EPA Chief Urges Emphasis on Prevention

Train Urges Shift in Fight on Dise...

By Thomas Love
Washington Star Staff Writer

Much of the effort to rid the world of disease is misdirected and largely a waste of money, Russell E. Train, Environmental Protection Agency administrator charges.

Rather than spending billions of dollars seeking cures for diseases, resources should be redirected toward preventing pollution and cleaning up the environment, which would eliminate the causes of much disease in the first place, he said yesterday.

He called for a "radical revision" in the fight against disease, which, he said, "must increasingly be fought not simply in the hospitals and doctors' offices, but in our streets and our homes and our offices, in our air and our water, in our food and our products, in our personal habits and lifestyles."

For instance, he pointed out, although 60 to 90 percent of all human cancer can be traced to environmental causes, virtually all of the money being spent to fight cancer is going into research for finding a cure.

"THERE IS an increasing body of evidence and an impressive array of expert opinion, that we may be approaching the whole question of human health from the wrong side," he told a meeting of scientists in Chicago.

"As a matter of national policy as well as of personal practice, an ounce of prevention may well be worth a pound of cure," he continued. "Environmental protection must become the most important ingredient in any national health program."

Train's forum was the first session of a three-day conference on environmental contamination by polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a group of industrial chemicals shown to be a major health hazard but whose use is still permitted in the United States.

In fact, he told the gathering, even though some minor steps have been taken to control the chemicals, they are "present in our environment to a far greater degree and at higher levels than we have previously thought."

Although some limits have been placed on uses of the chemical, some industries are still allowed to dump it into waterways, according to the EPA. Fish with more than five parts per million of PCB are considered unfit for human consumption, but concentrations of up to 350 ppm have been found, Train said.

THE NATION'S sole producer of PCBs, the Monsanto Co., has voluntarily restricted sales of the chemical for use in closed electrical systems — considered relatively safe and necessary.

However, PCB reprocessors sell the chemical for other industrial uses and most imported PCBs goes for other purposes.

In order to control pollution by such chemicals as PCBs — which have been used by industry since 1930, long before it was even suspected they might be dangerous — Train called for a Toxic Substances Control Act to give the government authority to ban chemicals until their safety is known.

It has long been a major complaint of environmentalists that substances are now permitted to be used even in food until proven unsafe rather then being banned until proven safe.

During the past five years, since such a law was proposed by President Richard M. Nixon, "we have introduced into the commercial market an estimated 600 compounds annually," Train said. "We have done so without any systematic, advance assessment of their potential impact upon public health.

"YET, AS WE have learned with such materials as vinyl chloride, we may not discover how harmful a compound until years after it has become a rather commonplace item in our everyday life, even a significant factor in our economy," he continued.

In calling for a national policy of preventive medicine based on a cleaner environment, Train quoted Dr. Ernst L. Wynder, president of the American Health Association, who estimated that 70 percent of deaths among Americans are caused by environmental factors.

Wynder said "this death toll is largely due to unhealthy lifestyles, unhealthy working environments and disease-producing products."

Train also quoted Dr. David Baltimore, who won a Nobel Prize for research linking cancer to viruses. In his first public sta... after receiving the ... he said, "The role ... ruses in cancer is ... The best hope today ... cures is research into env... ronmental causes of can... cer. This is a good place to... put funds now."

ALTHOUGH a pollution control program such as he is suggesting will be expensive, Train said, "when we control and cut pollution at the source, we are shifting its costs from the shoulders of society as a whole onto those of the polluter, where they belong in the first place."



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