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No escape from threat of cancer

By The Associated Press

Whatever you do — or don't do — these days seems to increase your chance of getting cancer.

Simply exist, and the risk is there.

In the past six months alone, there have been new warnings about coffee, water, hair dye, drugs, food colorings and cigarettes. Even the air is suspect.

The warnings usually stem from tests on laboratory animals. The researchers point out that in many cases there is no direct proof that a particular substance will cause cancer in humans. The findings are couched in terms of "possibilities" and "potentials."

Take the latest report on coffee, released last week. A study by Harvard University researchers concluded that people who drink a cup or two of coffee a day are nearly twice as likely as non-drinkers to get cancer of the pancreas. The scientists did not advise people to stop drinking coffee. They said only that there was a "suspicion" of a possible link between coffee and cancer.

You're willing to give up coffee, you say? How about breathing?

Researchers at Texas A&M University said earlier this year that they had tested the air on a Pacific island so remote it was chosen as the site of the first hydrogen bomb test. They found toxic chemicals — not from the bomb test, but from hexachlorobenzene (HCB), which causes cancer in animals and is a byproduct of more than a dozen manufacturing processes. The conclusion: There is "no place on Earth you can go without finding HCB."

Not only can't you breathe the air, you may not be able to drink the water. Dr. Robert Harris, a member of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality, told a group in Miami last October that unpublished studies further suggested the link between cancer and heavily chlorinated drinking water.

Cancer may be hereditary, too. Back in 1965, Dr. John H. T. O'Connor, University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City reported last September that there is "something" called "cancer family syndrome." He said the incidence of cancer in some families is so high that an unidentified genetic defect which may predispose people to the disease is probably being passed from generation to generation. "If you had a sheltered childhood, you're more likely to get a form of cancer called Hodgkin's disease," according to a study done at the Harvard School of Public Health. The study, released in January, said Hodgkin's disease may be caused by a common virus. Children infected in early life escape serious problems. "Persons at relatively high risk for the disease during young adulthood are those who as children

belonged to small families, lived in single-family houses, had relatively few neighborhood playmates and had relatively well-educated parents," the researchers concluded.

"Try to eliminate one health risk, and you may create another. Many people, for example, are trying to reduce their chances of heart disease by cutting down on cholesterol. But a January report in the Journal of the American Medical Association said low levels of blood cholesterol were linked to cancer of the colon or large intestine.

Some situations come down to a matter of which risk is worse. More than one million Americans take the drug reserpine to control high blood pressure. Last fall, the National Cancer Institute said reserpine causes cancer in animals and is "a potential risk to man." But the agency said the dangers of untreated high blood pressure outweigh the threat from reserpine.

The Food and Drug Administration decided

ed the risks from lead acetate weren't severe enough to prevent its use in some hair dyes. Studies show that animals can get cancer when fed large amounts of lead. But the FDA said last year that the amount of lead absorbed by someone using hair dye with lead acetate is "trivial." The agency said manufacturers could continue to use lead acetate as a color additive — although they will have to put a warning label on the product.

Cancer is the nation's second leading cause of death, behind heart disease. The American Cancer Society says 420,000 people in the United States will die of cancer this year — one every 75 seconds.

But you don't have to give up on life. The National Cancer Institute says: "The outlook is not hopeless." The encouraging words are part of the introduction to an institute guide on cancer. The title: "Everything Doesn't Cause Cancer."

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Speaking of Business

Wiley H. Clark Jr. —

Old Game

Some officials wonder why such trouble getting the Fed under control. Fed Chairman Volcker, altogether inadvertently the other day.

As testifying before the Monetary Policy subcommittee in Cavanaugh, a young Omaha, began asking

He noted that the central bank reserves rapidly declined in October. Banks have to post the deposits on their balance sheet. They get more reserves from the Fed. Loans and investments that increase their money supply.

Volcker was implying that increasing reserves, was a problem it professed not to have.

Volcker patiently sought to explain to the Omaha legislator that there are reserves: those that are held by the Federal Reserve and those that are held by the banks. If you want to see what the indicated, you should see the reserves supplied to the banks on our own initiative.

Volcker became a little convoluted. The chairman seemed to be saying that the monetary growth caused the inflation. "Total reserves," he said, "are the money supply." But Mr. Cavanaugh soon got to the point.

Volcker reserves, the chairman said, "held pretty close to the present. The surge came from borrowing at the window."

Volcker, who obviously believes in the money supply, asked: "You're borrowing reserves are not a growth of the money supply."

Volcker reserves support monetary growth. He conceded, but they're not a freebie, so to speak. He said, "The Fed will exert some restraint, of course, the Fed will slap the hands of a borrower the till too often."

Volcker said, "What we've been doing is to get them to the point where they can't borrow more."

Looking at the Ways We Die

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

Americans are more hypochondriacal than ever in our history, some observers suggest. Whatever the truth of that, it is evident that a morbid preoccupation with death is a major component of the national scene. Day after day, we are told that the air we breathe, the water and other beverages we drink, the food we ingest, and the substances we come into contact with at our jobs are all dangerous or potentially dangerous to our health.

Cancerphobia is, of course, the most prominent component of this obsession. Claims that we are caught in a "cancer epidemic" arise from many sources, and we are warned that we may get cancer from the sun that shines upon us, the frankfurters we eat at the ball park, the saccharin in the soft drinks we use to try to control our weight, the exhaust gases from our cars, etc. Some zealots are already complaining that too many Americans are disregarding warnings about carcinogens because they have been convinced by earlier scares that everything causes cancer, and, therefore, all one can do is relax and enjoy.

This background gives special interest to a government publication, "Final Mortality Statistics, 1978," just issued by the National Center for Health Statistics.

Arrayed in precise columns are statistics on how many Americans died in 1978 and earlier, as well as an elaborate analysis of what they died of. Here, if anywhere, it would seem, is the evidence needed to tell whether our hypochondria is justified. All humans die eventually, of course, but are we departing now in unusually large numbers and is cancer the most potent killer?

Hard as it may be for some people to believe, the overall message is largely reassuring. Americans are not dying in unprecedented numbers. The rate of death is not the nation's leading killer. The picture of how and when we die that emerges offers almost no support for most of the scaremongers.

Lowest Crude Death Rate

Preliminary figures indicate that in 1979 the U.S. had the lowest crude death rate in its history, 8.66 deaths per thousand population. This was below both the 1978 figure of 8.83 and 1977's 8.78. In all three years fewer than 2 million Americans died annually, well under 1% of our population.

The picture becomes even brighter when one considers we have a rapidly aging population, and for that reason alone one would expect the crude rate to rise. Adjusting for age — that is, calculating what the death rate would be if the American population every year had the same

age distribution it had in 1940 — the figures show that in 1978 the age-adjusted death rate was 40% less than it was in 1940. Just since 1960 the age-adjusted death rate has declined by almost 20%.

The obverse side of these data is the steadily rising expectation of life for the newborn. A baby born in 1930 could expect a life span of 60 years; one born in 1978 could expect 73.3 years. A female American born in 1978 could expect to live 78 years, while a baby boy could expect almost 70 years. All the 1978 figures were record highs.

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What are the causes of death in this country? In 1978 the largest single killer was heart disease, which was responsible for almost 38% of all deaths. A distant second was cancer, which killed about 20% of all who died.

was heart disease, which was responsible for almost 38% of all deaths. A distant second was cancer, which killed about 20% of all who died. The next three major killers were stroke and related ailments, 8%; accidents, 5.5%; and influenza and pneumonia, 3%. Diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, arteriosclerosis and suicide each claimed roughly 1.5% of all 1978 deaths.

Those who are determined to view every statistic as darkly as possible will probably interject: "Ah, but the rate of cancer deaths was higher than in 1977. How do you explain that?"

The crude death rate from cancer in 1978 did rise almost 1.5%. But to understand what happened and why we must again look at the age-adjusted figures. When that is done, it is seen that most of the cancer death rate increase from 1977 to 1978 was the result of an older population.

Nevertheless, even the age-adjusted data show a rise of 1.5% in the cancer death rate between 1977 and 1978. That was the net result of a decline in deaths from most major cancers and an increase in only two cancer categories. The cancers whose age-adjusted death rates declined in 1978 were breast cancer, cancer of the

mouth and nose, cancer of the genitalia, cancer of the urinary system, and leukemia. The increased death rates were for lung cancer and for cancer at miscellaneous body sites.

This immediately, and deservedly, focuses attention on lung cancer. The overall age-adjusted increase in lung cancer in 1978 was 3.2%, while for white women the increase was a whopping 7.7%.

The figures seem to speak for themselves. Insofar as the rate of cancer deaths in this country is rising, the single largest factor is the vast increase in cigarette smoking by white women over the past generation. In comparison, the increase in 1978 death rate from lung cancer for white males was only 1.8%, while the increases were even smaller for non-white males and females. Aside from lung cancer, in 1978 deaths from all other major forms of cancer either declined or remained the same.

Danger Posed by Smoking

The public health implications of these official government data would seem unmistakable. The most effective way to combat future increases in cancer deaths would be an all-out campaign against cigarettes. The danger to American lives posed by smoking is far greater than from asbestos, saccharin, the exhaust of chemical factories, the emanations from dumping grounds of chemical waste like the Love Canal, etc.

Why then is all the fury of current popular environmental and health crusaders aimed at nuclear power plants, the oil and chemical industries, etc.? Wouldn't all that energy and will for public improvement be far more fruitfully employed if directed against tobacco?

I don't feel capable of answering these questions adequately, though they have long disturbed me. Could it be that it is dramatic to oppose nuclear power and boring to insist that one's friends and relatives give up smoking — or even that the crusader himself quit the cigaret habit?

Certainly it is hard to doubt that the votes in the major tobacco-growing and processing states probably had something to do with the Carter administration's recent silence about the importance of stopping smoking. Joseph Califano, whatever his other virtues and faults, did try to mount a significant anti-smoking campaign. It is likely that many bureaucrats have made a connection between his undignified ouster and his naivete about the relationship between tobacco state votes and the needs of the administration.

Harry Schwartz was a member of the editorial board of The New York Times from 1951 to his retirement in late 1979.

Letters to the Editor:

Assessing Lending Policies at the World Bank