

COMMENTARY

Safe Milk, Tub Baths, and Relative Risk

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Recent press reports of a mandate to diminish the role of government in the lives of the citizenry, complaints about the onus of over-regulation, and the seeming influence of nonmedical forces on issues of public health prompted me to delve into my files for an old and familiar tale. In 1943, I was assigned by the United States Public Health Service to the South Dakota State Department of Health. They deployed me to Rapid City in Pennington County. There I was to serve as Health Officer of the county and city. My contribution to the war effort was to maintain the good health of the civilian population so that visiting servicemen from the nearby Rapid City Army Airbase would not be exposed to infection.

Soon after my arrival, I became aware that raw unpasteurized milk was being sold in grocery stores and served in restaurants. The U.S. Public Health Service had established a model Standard Milk Ordinance to prevent such situations. The concern was the spread of *Salmonella*. After I had spent what I thought was enough time and effort towards publicity and education, I asked that the Milk Ordinance be put on the agenda at the next meeting of the City Council.

I attended that meeting. I reminded the audience

(mainly dairy farmers, cattle men, and small-town citizens) of the advantages of passing this ordinance. I elaborated on the risks of salmonellosis and typhoid fever. The issue raised much debate, including a petition from "free people of a free country [are] opposed to the proposed ordinance." Before the issue came to a vote at a second meeting, a commissioner declared "more people are killed in bathtubs than from drinking raw milk." Although I acknowledged to the assembly that no one in Rapid City had died of typhoid fever in the preceding 3 years, I also reminded them of a nearby tourist city that about 20 years before had become a ghost town after an outbreak of typhoid. This helped the Milk Ordinance to win the day!

We are often reminded that if we disregard history we are bound to repeat its mistakes. We need to appreciate that the goal of regulation is not intrusion for intrusion's sake, but instead is protection of health based on rational application of professional standards and experience.

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