MUST WE HAVE A SICK ENVIRONMENT TO HAVE A HEALTHY ECONOMY?

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"THEY (AMERICANS) MAY FINALLY BECOME SO ENGROSSED IN A COWARDLY LOVE OF IMMEDIATE PLEASURE THAT THEIR INTEREST IN THEIR OWN FUTURE AND THAT OF THEIR DESCENDANTS MAY VANISH AND THEY WILL PREFER TAMELY TO FOLLOW THE COURSE OF THEIR DESTINY RATHER THAN MAKE A SUDDEN ENERGETIC EFFORT NECESSARY TO SET THINGS RIGHT."

Alexis De Tocqueville

Within the past 10 to 15 years, Congress and state & local governing bodies have enacted numerous laws designed to protect human health by managing the environment. Many of these laws have gone even further and have dealt with such related issues as visibility, water clarity, property damage, and plant and animal life. All these laws were enacted in response to the evident public clamor for a healthy environment. The struggle for quality environment takes place in many arenas, and after the legislative arena, the confrontations have shifted to the regulation promulgation arena where those interests that failed to win legislative battles are looking for another opportunity to weaken or undermine environmental health programs. Some of these pollution interests would have

us choose a course that not only sacrifices the public's right to good health, but has the ultimate effect of increasing medical, hospital, and insurance bills. Now, some of the official inflation fighters have targeted environmental and occupational measures for their criticism while admitting that they really have no cost data on environmental and occupational disease. Since these economic experts don't know the costs, they won't consider them in a cost-benefit equation. And still worse, they seem to reject any responsibility for gathering data on the effects of environmental diseases or disability, inefficiency, morale, comfort, quality of life, life-span, absenteeism, insurance rates, Medicaid and Medicare budgets and other health care costs. It does seem reasonable, however, that we should be able to save some portion of the annual more than $100 billion cancer, heart, and lung disease bill by controlling the environmental causes of these diseases.

We have a long way to go in sharpening and utilizing the tools of environmental epidemiology to better identify the health effects of environmental chemicals and stresses.

Our political leaders largely ignore the issue of population stabilization, which (and while frequently an emotional issue), is an absolute necessity for the human animal to thrive in balance with the resources of his environment - - including energy supplies. The human species, either through rational behavior or environmental limitation, must and will be limited. The plight of our energy addicted and starved society may well portray a system that has filled its "ecological niche." The social, political, and environmental consequences of over-population are evident daily.

Public opinion surveys in 1979 continued to indicate that Americans favor environmental protection even at a price.

"Concern in the public's mind for the environment is withstanding the pressures of inflation and high taxes, according to the results of a 1978 poll reported by the environmental organization, Resources for the Future.

"RFF found that 53 percent of the public surveyed agreed with the statement, 'Protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing improvements must be made regardless of cost.'

"Sixty-two percent of the over 1,000 respondents interviewed in July and August of last year said that they would opt for protecting the environment at the cost of higher prices for products, rather than choose lower prices and more pollution.

"Although people indicated they wanted more energy, 47 percent continued to say that protecting the environment is more important. Only 31 percent chose more energy.

"Further, in a year when tiny snail darter species held the building of a huge dam, a majority of 67 percent still felt that, 'An endangered species must be protected, even at the expense of commercial activity.'

"RFF stated that even among those who felt that taxes are 'very unreasonable,' 52 percent emphasized improvement in the environment." Previously, a 1977 Harris Survey indicated, "...the number of Americans who are now worried about air and water pollution has reached record peaks, according to a recent Harris survey of 1,539 adults. "A sizeable 66 percent feel air pollution is a 'very serious problem,' up from 46 percent who felt that way in 1975, while an even higher 67 percent feel water pollution is `very serious,' up from 51 percent last year.

"Part of the reason people are worried about air and water pollution is the widely held view that neither government nor industry is doing an adequate job of controlling it.

"Two groups emerged with positive assessments from the public on the job they are doing -- environmental protection groups (57 percent) and consumer groups (45 percent).

"The public feels that the system of federal taxes on business should be changed to encourage corporations to do a better job on cleaning up air and water pollution. They would like to see a flexible tax plan under which those companies that continued to pollute the air and water would be forced to pay higher levies, while those that undertook effective control programs would have taxes reduced."

There is no doubt that environmental measures contribute to inflation, but only moderately. A 1978 Chase Econometrics study concluded that EPA programs add an average of between .3 and .4 percent annually to the Consumer Price Index.

Whatever public backlash has developed against environmental measures would appear to be aimed more toward questionable regulatory methods than against the basic statute and the goal of a healthy environment. This behooves regulation promulgating authorities to utilize rational and acceptable methods and strictly follow the statutory intent. But those protesting regulations must be reminded that regulations are mandated not by bureaucrats, but by congressmen and legislators elected by the citizenry.

U. S. Senator Gary Hart of Colorado recently noted that, "Public Support for air quality is stronger than ever before, but public frustration with government regulation is also stronger. A major challenge before us is to satisfy both of these popular demands: cleaner air and less burdensome regulations." Perhaps greater utilization of economic incentives such as a "pollution tax" should be effected: This is a methodology that has not been well utilized. However, limited experience in the Delaware River Basin has indicated that taxes could reduce water pollution as much as current regulations -- but at only half the cost.

It has become increasingly important, but perhaps not more common, for environmental health agencies to have their own economists to study cost-benefits of existing and proposed requirements and to counter as necessary some of the ridiculous economic claims of those interests opposed to environmental controls. A November, 1979 abstract of a paper entitled, "Putting Environmental Economics in Perspective: Case Study of Four Corners Power Plant, New Mexico," by John R. Bartlit, D.Ch.E., published in the American Journal of Public Health, states that, "Environmental Control costs can be made to appear much larger in impact than they actually are by placing costs in misleading contexts or failing to provide perspective. It is essential for continued public support of environmental health programs that this practice be countered by more-meaningful presentations of economic data. As an example, analytic methods appropriate to the case of a large coal-fired power plant in northwestern New Mexico are developed and discussed. Pollution control expenditures at the Four Corners Power Plant were presented as costing- 82 million dollars annually. Although this figure may be the correct one, data were collected and analyzed to show that this cost represented an increase of only 5 to 60 cents on a $100 electricity bill for the consumer of electricity."

Many of us old-time public healthers have never lost sight of the need for prevention, the value of prevention, and the cost-benefit superiority of prevention over treatment. We have watched with frustration and dismay while staggering billions have been poured into the sickness treatment systems of our communities, states and Nation with unsatisfactory (though expensive) attendant impact on the health status of our citizens. It was erroneously concluded that treating health problems was sufficient to improve the health status of our citizens. Our political and health leaders are now seeing that the sickness treatment methodology and expenses have not been a panacea.

Many of us remember the "olden" days when the vast majority of environmental health programs were organized within the framework of the then traditional state public health departments. But with emphasis on consumer protection, comprehensive programming, organizational visibility, importance of citizen input and participation, and effective regulatory actions, the organizational picture has changed radically within the past decade.

Public and political clamor and concern over the rapidly deteriorating environment in the late 1960s caused a widespread re-evaluation of environmental health problems, program goals, program support, program effectiveness as well as organizational settings. Programs were shifted to new and/or different agencies for a variety of reasons -- some valid and some questionable. Eager citizen environmentalists and citizen action groups sometimes confused change with progress. Public health and environmental health officials generally exhibited a high degree of territorial defense and a relatively low titer of organizational and program management knowledge. Powerful polluter lobbyists delighted in the opportunity to retard and confuse environmental health measures through repeated reorganizations and by placing health personnel and programs in positions of greater "political responsiveness."

Regardless of the organizational placement of environmental health, the goal should be to insure an environment that will confer optimal health and safety on this and future generations.

The mission should be one of citizen and environmental protection rather than environmental utilization and development.

Some environmental health agencies have not fully developed the concept of mission and have been ready prey for those polluters and others they are charged with regulating. This has sometimes resulted in the environmental health agencies protecting or promoting the interests of those they are charged with regulating.

Our political leaders are increasingly realizing that improving the quality of life depends on keeping people healthy. They are recognizing that we must build a conscience for prevention. They have been advised that we are going to be spending increasing amounts for health care with little overall impact on health status unless we improve our environmental quality. They are increasingly recognizing that any National Health Insurance program will be doomed to failure and spiraling costs without more effective environmental health and other preventive measures as a prerequisite, and that National Health Insurance without such measures will be another expensive experiment in the matter of misplaced priorities and improper timing. Our leaders are increasingly recognizing that we must stop expecting medicine to bail us out from the consequences of our own foolishness, and that we must stop waiting for tragedy before taking action. It is increasingly important to realize that the concern of environmentalists with wildlife and the natural environment is a sound manifestation of interest in the entire natural system of which the human animal is a part, and the environmental effects on wildlife serve as an "early warning" or preview of coming attractions in accordance with the known and proven ecological maxim that "everything is connected to everything else." And citizens are learning that sound environmental health measures must be for today and tomorrow -- not just tomorrow.

I cannot conscientiously address the matter of environmental problem priorities without again noting the impact of other societal issues on environmental problems. Over-population and the resulting consumption and/or destruction of non-renewable resources is the single highest priority affecting the environment. Population stabilization is the only real preventive endeavor, as curative programs to control the resulting secondary problems of environmental degradation, energy shortages, transportation, land-use, congestion, crime, and famine have not and will not be effective without resolving the basic issue of over-population.

Environmental health professionals should support specific national and global actions and agreements to stabilize human population levels through such mechanisms as education, racial justice, sexual equality, technology sharing, birth control, re-orientation of social values and attitudes, demographic research and planning, and economic and fiscal policies and incentives.

Power for homes, industries, and transportation from non-polluting, renewable energy sources is the final major issue having an impact on environmental health problems. For a number of reasons including industry monopolies, union agreements, and governmental conflicts-of-interest, the nation has not made even a good token commitment to solar resources. Underlying the previously mentioned issues are ignorance and poverty which must be addressed and solved for there to be substantial, permanent, long-range progress toward our goal of "an environment that will confer optimal health and safety on this and future generations," or for people to die young as late in life as possible.

With regard to the environment and the economy, let us not be misled into a process of "versus" or "either/or." A quality environment and healthy economy are not contradictory expectations and, in fact, are mutually interdependent. We can't have an economy without an environment. "Ecology" and "economy" are both derivatives of the Greek word "ecos" (oikos), which means house. An economist was a keeper of the house, and an ecologist is a keeper of the big house in which we all live -- or our environment -- the place in which we are all going to spend the rest of our lives.

It is a matter of serious concern that the human animal sometimes seems more willing to suffer the health, social, and economic consequences of disease and pollution than to pay for environmental health for this and future generations. Perhaps the human animal can slightly adapt to some degree of environmental degradation, but it is indeed alarming that the human animal might attempt to merely survive through adaptation rather than thrive through environmental quality.