

Preventive Medicine and the Politics of Disease

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Great strides are being made in biomedical research in the development of cures for cancer, much of which comes from research studies on animals and afflicted humans. As these successes are publicized (as on CBS national news, May 2-3, 1983), and the promise that all cancers will be eventually treatable, the 850,000 people who will be diagnosed as having cancer this year will certainly have some hope.

These successes justify, in the public's eye, the continued and unrestricted exploitation of laboratory animals for human benefit. Any questioning of the ethics of using laboratory animals in such research is perceived as being tantamount to ignoring human welfare and of placing animals before people. The public has been conditioned to believe in biomedical science and technology as a kind of truth and trustingly does not question

the direction that biomedical research and development have taken. And if and when they do become ill, they have the hope and promise of a cure. And relief and gratitude if they are cured.

But is it not more of a mark of progress to be able to *prevent* cancer and other diseases than to possess only an armament of cures? Without preventive and health care maintenance programs, including environmental health and ecological medicine, human suffering and sickness will only increase as our environment, air, water, and food become even more contaminated with agricultural and industrial chemicals.

Yet what options do we have, realistically, when advances in preventive medicine are in politicized limbo? This is because the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency and other government departments are in a state of "bureaucratic gridlock" with allied industries responsible for food quality and environmental health, the two complementary pillars of health-maintenance. Furthermore, the kind of research that is funded by pharmaceutical and medical biotechnology industries (for diagnosis as well as for treatment) is oriented primarily toward "treating disease as it comes" (*venienti occurrere morbo*) rather than in its prevention, which is less profitable.

The domain of disease prevention has been relegated to the Federal Government, while the vainglorious war against human sickness is the almost exclusive, legally protected monopoly of the A.M.A. - biomedical establishment. But when organized and establishment medicine and research focus primarily upon interventive treatment-oriented cures and garners public funds to find more cures, we are faced with something more insidious than profit motives and the politicized inertia of progressive preventive medicine. What we have is a hypnotic ideological fixation on a wholly mechanistic, interventive kind of medicine based

upon an aggressive dominionistic attitude toward disease and toward life itself. This attitude extends also into our dealings with other nations and with the forces of nature: an adversary mentality prepared to fight, to self-righteously intervene or rescue, rather than through understanding and humility prevent the need for violent intervention. Until a change in attitude occurs, a paradigm or gestalt-shift in awareness, physical and mental suffering, and environmental problems will exacerbate, as will the need for more medical and technological "fixes."

While there is no intent to deny that people who are sick should have the benefit of interventive and curative treatment, the grand illusion that new cures (in the absence of concerted disease-preventive programs) represents progress, must be shattered. Otherwise the quality of human life and of all life on this planet will continue to decline, becoming increasingly dependent upon interventive remedies and supports and upon the exploitation of laboratory animals as "models" of our diseased states. Medical nemesis is inevitable, if, for political, economic and ideological reasons, society continues to ignore the importance of preventive medicine and the increasingly pathogenic state of the world in which we live. A first step, which our democracy once tried, but failed abysmally, would be for all proposed medical, biological, agricultural, chemical, and industrial advances and innovations to be first evaluated by democratically constituted review boards and not by self-serving, ideologically fixated panels of specialists. Most decisions are made on the basis of corporate interest, and when not balanced with enlightened self-interest, as the historical record of industrial society attests, the good of society will not be served. society attests, the good of society will not be served.

In the final analysis, life has meaning when it is loved, served, nurtured, and protected, and no meaning when it

is simply objectified, controlled, exploited or destroyed for purely selfish motives. The difference in attitude, as between reverence and domination, and between preventive and interventive medicine, reflects the dialectical tension and nature of our existence. We cannot be well without both complementary polarities being equal: reverence and domination together give rise to humane stewardship of animals and Earth: and preventive and interventive medicine together

are the basis of human and environmental health and well-being. We have over-compensated on the side of domination and intervention. Interventive medicine has its place, not as a panacea, but to alleviate sickness and suffering, when the need arises. Preventive medicine is the essence of self-dominion, a complement of humane stewardship through which we may indeed heal and redeem ourselves, and in the process restore our planet for the benefit of all life to come.
