First the Good News

Since 1975, grass-roots action at the local level has brought important successes. It was grass-roots action that killed the civilian nuclear power industry in the U.S., principally by making radioactive waste disposal difficult and therefore expensive, and by turning every nuclear power plant into a fight and therefore into a public relations nightmare for its electric utility owner.

Grass-roots action at the local level crippled the municipal solid waste incinerator industry. Since 1985, 70 incinerators were built, but during the same period at least 280 incinerators were killed.[1] The municipal incinerator industry is on the ropes.

Grass-roots action killed expansion of the industry that buries hazardous wastes in shallow pits in the ground. Since BFI opened the appropriately-named "Last Chance" dump in Colorado in 1991, no new hazardous waste dumps have even been proposed. (After getting a license for its "Last Chance" dump, BFI abandoned the hazardous waste dump business entirely.)

Most importantly, grass-roots action forced the International Joint Commission (IJC) to recommend an entirely new philosophy of chemical regulation -- one that assumes chemicals are harmful until proven safe, and one based on the principle of precautionary action. The precautionary principle says that, to avoid irreparable harm to the environment and to human health, wherever it is acknowledged that a practice (or substance) could cause harm, even without conclusive scientific proof that it has caused harm or does cause harm, the practice (or emissions of the substance) should be prevented and eliminated. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1994 rejected the IJC's recommendations, but the handwriting is on the wall now, officially.)[2]

And Now the Bad

Despite these important successes, chemicals released into the environment are still decimating wildlife, making people sick, and killing people. In this sense, despite thousands of successes in local battles, grass-roots activists are losing the war.

Consider these facts:

** The incidence rates for 5 kinds of cancers are decreasing, but the incidence rates for 19 kinds of cancer are steadily increasing. The death rates for 12 kinds of cancer are dropping, but the deaths rates for 12 other cancers continue to rise.[3] Among the fastest-growing is breast cancer. In 1960, a woman's chance of getting breast cancer was 1 in 20; today it is 1 in 9, moving toward 1 in 8.

** Increasingly, couples in their prime child-bearing years are sterile; this may be due in part to a 53% decline in sperm count that has been documented among men in all industrialized countries over the past 50 years, a decline that is apparently continuing.[4]

** Ectopic pregnancy rates have quadrupled in the last 20 years.[5] An ectopic pregnancy is one that occurs outside the uterus, in one of the fallopian tubes; if not treated, such a pregnancy is fatal to the mother. Even when treated properly, it can result in sterility.

** The prevalence of endometriosis (a painful disease of the tissues lining the uterus, which often results in sterility) is steadily increasing and now afflicts somewhere between 5 and 9 million American women.[6]

** Immune system disorders (such as asthma and diabetes) are increasing. In 1990 the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (JAMA) observed that death rates from asthma have been increasing in the U.S., Canada, England, France, Denmark and Germany.[7] Other sources report increasing death rates from asthma in Wales and Australia.[8] In the U.S., the increase has been rapid. Asthma death rates increased 31% between 1980 and 1987 (from 1.3 per 100,000 population to 1.7 per 100,000). The biggest increase occurred among children between the ages of 5 and 15.

The prevalence of asthma is also increasing, especially among young children. Among children ages 6 to 11, the prevalence of asthma increased from 4.8% in 1971-74 to 7.6% in 1976-1980, a 58% increase in a short period. More recent studies indicate that the increases are continuing.

Another immune system disease, diabetes, is also increasing rapidly in the U.S. The prevalence of IDDM (insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, also called Type I diabetes) doubled between 1964 and 1981.[9] A 1993 study says, "[W]e are undergoing an epidemic of IDDM with the rapid increase in the number of cases seen recently."[10]

** The prevalence of nervous system disorders (Lou Gehrig's disease, and Parkinson's disease) is increasing.[11]

** A new disease has emerged called "multiple chemical sensitivity," characterized by extreme sensitivity to low levels of various chemicals, sometimes including odors from new carpets, perfumes, and the fragrances in commercial products such as waxes and detergents. Paints and solvents can set off an allergic-type reaction. Symptoms of MCS range in severity from an itchy rash to coma. An estimated 10% to 15% of the U.S. population now suffers from this disease in one form or another, and the prevalence appears to be rising.[12]

** Birth defect rates are steadily increasing. The federal Centers for Disease Control in 1990 summarized the trends in 38 types of birth defects; they found 29 increasing, 2 decreasing, and 7 remaining unchanged.[13]

** Eight studies of air pollution in U.S. cities have now shown that fine particles (the invisible soot emitted by incinerators, automobiles, power plants and heating units) are presently killing about 60,000 Americans each year.[14] More than a dozen studies have, in one way or another, confirmed this relationship. Furthermore, there appears to be no threshold, no level below which effects disappear. This means that people are being killed by air pollution levels well within existing federal standards.

** In 1990, the American Public Health Association (APHA) estimated that each year 50,000 to 70,000 Americans die of diseases developed from toxic exposures on the job. Furthermore, APHA estimated that 350,000 new cases of occupational disease develop each year from toxic exposures.[15]

Good News Amid the Bad

It seems clear that the opportunity is ripe, and steadily growing, for a major political organizing campaign with health as the centerpiece. Everyone cares about their health and the health of their children. A health-centered organizing campaign offers a clear entryway into the much larger question, "What has gone wrong with America?" Addressing this question would require what we call "Big-Picture Organizing."

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague

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[1] Ellen Connett, "Since the 1980's a Minimum of 280 Proposals to Build Municipal Waste Incinerators in the U.S. Have Been Defeated or Abandoned," WASTE NOT #283 [from: Work On Waste, U.S.A., 82 Judson St., Canton, N.Y. 13617: phone 315/379-9200] (July 1994), pg. 1. The 280 figure is an underestimate; several incinerators have been defeated since July 1994, according to Ellen 1994, pg. 1. The 280...
Connett, personal communication to Maria Pellerano November 22, 1994.


[3] Incidence rate means occurrence of cancer per 100,000 population, age-adjusted; death rate means deaths from cancer per 100,000 population, age-adjusted. The 5 cancers with decreasing incidence are: mouth and pharynx; uterus; stomach; cervix; and esophagus. The 18 cancers with increasing incidence are: colon/rectum; larynx; testicle; bladder; Hodgkin's; childhood cancers; leukemia; thyroid; liver; pancreas; ovaries; lung; skin; female breast; prostate; kidney; brain; non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; and multiple myeloma. Death rates are dropping for mouth and pharynx; uterus; stomach; cervix; colon/rectum; larynx; testicles; bladder; Hodgkin's; childhood cancers; leukemia; and thyroid. Death rates are increasing for esophagus; liver; pancreas; ovaries; lung; skin; female breast; prostate; kidney; brain; non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; and multiple myeloma. Source of information: Barry A. Miller and others, editors, CANCERSTATISTICS REVIEW 1973-1990 [National Institutes of Health Publication No. 93-2789] (Bethesda, Md.: National Cancer Institute, 1993), Table 1-3, pg. 1.[27]


[11] Increases in Parkinson's disease and in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease) are documented in Office

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