The incidence of all cancers besides lung cancer, taken together, is increasing 27 percent during the period. [5] To detoxify all industrial chemicals. In a recent article in a new industrial/environmental magazine called ECO, Schneider argues as follows:[3] Because of fear and panic spread by the environmental movement for 20 years, the U.S. is now spending $140 billion per year "making sure that toxic chemicals are not present at levels exceeding a few parts per billion..."; This money is being wasted because it has not reduced the cancer rate in the U.S. Besides, there is no need for such programs because "there is no cancer epidemic," Schneider asserts. However, this "evidence" (as Schneider calls it) does not stop environmental leaders from "painting many chemical compounds as potential causes of cancer." Why do they do this? To attract donations, of course. Even if we ignore the tortured logic of this argument,[4] Schneider seems not to have grasped the basic cancer facts. He says flatly, "According to federal health studies, the incidence of cancer in most age groups has been steady over the past two decades." This is simply not true. It is not even close to true. During the past 35 years (the period of time for which the National Cancer Institute has data), the incidence of colon cancer has increased 97 percent; breast cancer has increased 58 percent. Taken together, the incidence of all types of cancer has increased 42 percent during the period. Omitting lung cancer, the incidence of all other cancers has increased 27 percent during the period. [5] The incidence of all cancers besides lung cancer, taken together, is increasing at about 0.8 percent each year, year after year. These are age-adjusted figures, so they are not affected by the aging trend in the American population. The incidence of cancer is increasing steadily, relentlessly and, for those who are stricken by it, devastatingly. Often, when life-saving treatment is available, it is painful, disfiguring, protracted, and exceedingly costly.

What causes cancer according to Schneider? "High-fat, high-calorie diets, smokin, [sic] and drinking alcohol are the major sources of cancer," he says. Smokin does cause cancer, lots of it. And it represents a stunning failure of public policy--tobacco companies have been getting away with murder for years. Alcohol is clearly implicated in cancer, too, though the cause-and-effect relationship is not straightforward, as we shall see. Do high calorie diets cause cancer? They cause body fat, but do they cause cancer? Not that we have heard.

But not according to Keith Schneider. In August, 1991, Schneider asserted that exposure to dioxin is "now considered by some experts to be no more risky than spending a week in the sun." He did not name any experts. Schneider's ability to detoxify dioxin regardless of the scientific evidence earned him a featured place in a long article in the June issue of AMERICAN JOURNALISM REVIEW, called "See No Evil," in which it is revealed that no scientist ever told Schneider dioxin was as safe as sunshine--he and his editors at the TIMES simply made it up. [2] "We wanted to have a big splash with it [the dioxin story]." Schneider told author Vicki Monks. "We felt that the media coverage of this environmental issue needed to be reassessed. We need to be a lot smarter because not everything is a disaster," Schneider said. Recently Schneider has broadened his horizons. He's now working to detoxify all industrial chemicals. In a recent article in a new industrial/environmental magazine called ECO, Schneider argues as follows:[3] Because of fear and panic spread by the environmental movement for 20 years, the U.S. is now spending $140 billion per year "making sure that toxic chemicals are not present at levels exceeding a few parts per billion..."; This money is being wasted because it has not reduced the cancer rate in the U.S. Besides, there is no need for such programs because "there is no cancer epidemic," Schneider asserts. However, this "evidence" (as Schneider calls it) does not stop environmental leaders from "painting many chemical compounds as potential causes of cancer." Why do they do this? To attract donations, of course.

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And does fat in the diet cause cancer? Among scientists, the popularity of this theory is waning.

No cancer is being studied more aggressively than cancer of the female breast. This is true because thousands of angry women have banded together and pressed effectively to break lose $200 million in federal funds to study the causes of breast cancer. And what is being learned?

Fascinating new reports in SCIENCE NEWS and SCIENCE describe a dozen pathbreaking research initiatives.[6] The '80s theory that dietary fat causes breast cancer is defunct. Many lines of research are pointing toward one causal factor: dozens of different technologies that increase exposure of women to estrogen and estrogen-like chemicals in the environment. Some chemicals in the environment mimic estrogen: the pesticides DDT, heptachlor, and atrazine, for example, and some products of combustion--some polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), for example; and some industrial chemicals such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), BPA (bis-phenyl-A, found in polycarbonate plastics), and nonylphenol (found in polystyrene plastics) all mimic estrogens.

Then there are the chemicals that affect the way the human body metabolizes (breaks down) naturally occurring estrogens, such as estradiol: paradoxically, dioxin, cigarette smoke, and indole-3-carbinol (found in cabbage and broccoli), all seem to have a desirable effect on estradiol metabolism; alcohol, and the combustion product benz[a]pyrene have a negative effect. None of these effects are well- understood, but they need to be.

Strong light at night, and magnetic fields, can both increase the estrogen levels in a woman's blood stream. They both seem to affect the pineal gland in the center of the brain. The pineal gland produces the hormone melatonin which seems to fight breast cancer by reducing estrogen levels in the blood. Alcohol raises estrogen levels in the blood of premenopausal women, perhaps by diminishing melatonin.

The point is that scientists do not know what causes 60 to 70 percent of all breast cancers. They do know there is an epidemic of breast cancer occurring and that chemical contamination from many sources--pesticides, automobile exhausts, industrial solvents, plastics, incinerator emissions--all seem to contribute.

Logic says that human exposure to a mixture of thousands of poorly-understood, biologically-active chemicals seems certain, sooner or later, to take a toll on us. Prudence and common-sense precaution demand MORE control of chemicals, not LESS.

Since the mid-19th century, the corporation has replaced the church
as the dominant social organization of our time. In the past 50 years, this trend has given rise to technologies that are increasingly at odds with human health and sustainability. The conflict between sustainability and corporate-driven behavior (and the technologies such behaviors produce) is becoming more obvious to a growing number of people each passing day. A talented writer like Keith Schneider could help a troubled nation think through these difficult issues if he would but deny himself the pleasure of answers that are satisfyingly simple but wrong.

Schneider has been a star reporter since his material first began appearing in the TIMES in January, 1988, and deservedly so. But his work on chemicals this past year seems destined to end his career as a serious writer. If this keeps up, he will find himself parked in a flack job as "vice-president for corporate communications" at some major chemical conglomerate in Delaware or Missouri or Michigan.

Indeed, perhaps that is the point.

--Peter Montague


[4] Schneider implies that government programs have succeeded in "making sure that toxic chemicals are not present at levels exceeding a few parts per billion" and yet the cancer rate has remained steady. Wrong on two counts: the levels of toxins in most compartments of the environment are far above "a few parts per billion" and, as noted in the text above, the incidence of cancer is continuously rising.

The body of every American carries a burden of toxic chemicals that far exceeds "a few parts per billion." Women's breast milk contains many toxins at levels that exceed a few parts per billion. Most of the fruits and vegetables we eat every day, and most of the meats, contain toxins at levels that exceed "a few parts per billion."


Descriptor terms: keith schneider; new york times; dioxin; studies; toxicity; laboratory animals; wildlife; human health; diabetes; reduced sperm count; reproductive toxicity; reproductive toxicology; sexual differentiation; developmental disorders; sexual development; breast cancer; cancer, causes; carcinogens; estrogen; sex hormones; xenoestrogens; pesticides; ddt; heptachlor; atrazine; phas; pcb; bis- phenyl-a; nonylphenol; polystyrene; polycarbonate plastics; plastics; estradiol; cigarettes; tobacco; indole-3-carbinol; broccoli; alcohol; pineal gland; melatonin; magnetic fields; magnetism;