

A Cancer in the System:

Why are the government and the big charities ignoring the environmental causes of cancer?

There is no notion so flawed that society will not, at some time, adopt it as a universal truth. Few misconceptions are as wide spread as the idea that the war against cancer is being won. It's hardly surprising, for scarcely a week goes by without a promise that deliverance is just around the corner. Yesterday, for example, we learnt that a new injection might cure lymphomas. The day before, the government announced that a further pounds90 million would help to eliminate intestinal tumours. Cancer, most commentators agree, is all but dead.

So it's perplexing to discover that cancer in industrialised countries is not falling, but rising. While lung, cervical, uterine and stomach cancers are declining, and treatments for testicular cancer and childhood leukaemia have greatly improved, cancer overall has increased by 60% per cent in the last 50 years. Breast cancer has almost doubled. Prostate cancer has risen by 200%, testicular cancer in young men by 300%. In the US, childhood brain cancers and leukaemias have been advancing by 1.8% a year since 1973. In Britain, forty per cent of us are likely to contract cancer at some stage in our lives.

These increases are often ascribed to better detection and an ageing population. But the figures are age-adjusted: a 60 year-old today is 200 per cent more likely to contract prostate cancer than a 60 year-old would have been in 1950. Reported cancers have continued to rise after the universal deployment of new screening techniques: this is not an artefact of diagnosis. Cancer is thriving.

The reason, according to the professor of environmental medicine Samuel Epstein, is obvious. Since 1940, the world's production of synthetic organic chemicals has risen 600-fold, exposing our bodies to a massive toxic load. There is plenty of evidence to support his contention.

Last year, for example, a US study found that children living beside busy roads were six times as likely to suffer from cancer as children living in quiet areas. This is hardly surprising: the two most carcinogenic compounds ever detected are both produced by diesel engines. An English study published in 1997 showed that children living within five kilometres of oil refineries and chemical plants were more likely to contract cancer than those living further away.

Figures released by the US Environmental Protection Agency last year suggest that as many as 7 per cent of all cancers are caused by dioxins, mostly from incinerators. A Danish study published in 1999 showed that women whose bodies contain high concentrations of the pesticide dieldrin are twice as likely to develop cancer.

Other scientific papers have highlighted the dangers of herbicides, beef hormones, petrol additives, oral contraceptives, artificial sweeteners, PVC and scores of other chemicals.

So I commend to you a fascinating document, published by the Department of Health, called the NHS Cancer Plan, which tells us how the government intends to eliminate cancer in England. It contains plenty of helpful advice on giving up smoking. It outlines a scheme for increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables

children eat. But only one pollutant is mentioned as a possible cause of cancer: radon gas, which happens to be naturally occurring.

It's not hard to see that both the major polluting industries and the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing cancer "cures" (they are often one and the same) have a certain interest in sustaining the status quo. But it strikes me that these might not be the only lobbyists the government is listening to. The big cancer charities also appear reluctant to take contamination seriously.

The Imperial Cancer Research Fund's website records no matches for the word "pollution". The researcher Martin Walker reports that of the 110 research units cited in its 1998 scientific report, not one deals with chemical or environmental carcinogens.

Last year the Cancer Research Campaign predicted that cancer would be cured by 2050, as a result of new genetic technologies.

Its website mentions pollution, but dismisses concerns with the claim that "experts think that only 5% of preventable cancer deaths may be linked to environmental factors". The CRC's ten-page press release on poverty and cancer blames inequalities in treatment for differing rates of death, but says nothing about pollution, even though the poor are far more likely to live beside dirty factories and toxic dumps than the rich.

Give them more money, the cancer charities claim, and they will find the magic formula which will save us all from a hideous death. But could it be possible that we are dying so that they might live?

Taken from <http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au>