

# The Environment: Another Responsibility for Health Workers

Viewing the growth of the anti-nuclear war movement, one must be impressed with the vanguard role of physicians and other health workers. Vigorous organizational and educational programs of many different kinds of health groups, especially of the Physicians for Social Responsibility (Adams and Cullen, 1971), have been particularly effective. Those activities have forcefully demonstrated to the American people, and indeed to people all over the world, that no way can exist for dealing with the medical consequences of nuclear holocaust, and that the only defense is its prevention. The unprecedented demonstration on June 12 in New York City, in which many students, faculty and workers of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine participated, showed how deeply that message has penetrated the consciousness of the people of our country.

Yet health workers, physicians and scientists, in our view, have not been sufficiently alert in acting against another imminent threat to health and safety. The threat results from the wholesale attack by the Reagan administration on executive and legislative regulations concerning pollution of the environment and protection of workers from job hazards—regulations developed and enacted in the past fifteen years in response to powerful public demand. A harbinger of the generalized attack should have been recognized in one of the early acts of the Reagan administration. Almost as a symbol of obeisance to industry and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Reagan government, in the spring of 1981, fired Dr. Anthony Robbins from his position as director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Robbins had taken seriously the mandate given his Institute, and proceeded in an activist way to implement the law requiring standards to protect workers against hazards to their safety and health. He offended big business, and the Reagan response, clear and certain as it was, heralded the future position of the administration on environmental issues. Shortly afterward, the government diminished further the effectiveness of NIOSH by a tactic that has become routine. The staff of the Institute was cut to a point at which it cannot carry out its duties even if there were a will by its leadership to do so. In an even more flagrant symbolic act, the government ordered moving of personnel from Washington to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. That constituted a kind of banishment of staff to a location where they could be more effectively monitored and limited in their activism.

The point of this recounting of the fate of NIOSH is to note that the reaction of the biomedical community and health workers in general was minimal. Whether the grossness of the act was so shocking that all were paralyzed, or whether its significance was missed, little response came from people and organizations who should have been most concerned. NIOSH is one of the National Institutes established by Congress; one can readily imagine the strong protests and anger that would have been expressed by scientists and physicians had a similar action

been taken against another of those Institutes, let us say the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute or the National Cancer Institute. What followed and continues in the wake of the reprisals against Robbins and NIOSH is considered below, underscoring the necessity of the biomedical community to be vigilant. Before proceeding, we want to record that Robbins has many close friends and supporters at our College of Medicine where, in fact, he did his honors work in biochemistry while getting his undergraduate degree at Harvard College.\*

That the action against Robbins was an important turning point has been borne out by subsequent events. In March of this year a group of ten leading national environmental groups prepared a documented indictment of the Reagan environmental record, showing how far the process of regression has gone (*Indictment*, 1982). Some of the charges made in that alarming catalog of irresponsible actions are summarized below.

The Clean Air Act was passed in 1970 by Congress in response to great public pressure. The American people had become aware that human health, basic biological systems, the natural beauty of the country and recreation parks were in the process of being undermined or destroyed by pollution of all kinds. The vote they forced in the United States Congress was bipartisan and overwhelming. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was designated as the administrative body under the Act; now that agency has been devastated by cuts in the budget so that it cannot do the job mandated by Congress. Beyond this, the Reagan administration has given up the goal of keeping the air clean. It has proposed amendments to the Act to weaken health standards to cover only what it calls "significant risks." In reality that means removing legal protection, in the sphere of the air we breathe, for children, elderly people and persons with disease of the heart and lungs. Thus far Congress has resisted that move. The Reagan government also has tried to delay the deadline for attaining protective air quality standards from 1982 to as late as 1993. It has sought to weaken auto emission standards with respect to nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide, condemning millions of urban dwellers to dangerously unhealthy air. Pretending that insistence on safety and emission standards has caused the economic difficulties of the automobile industry, the Reagan administration has sought to cripple the application of such standards to new cars, and to eliminate provision for recall if such standards are not met. The administration wants to rescind regulations preventing new chemical pollution in already polluted areas, and others giving protection to unpolluted areas. Thus it would allow new industrial polluters to invade presently unpolluted lo-

\*NIOSH under Robbins' leadership helped support the Summer Field Work Program in Occupational Health of the Montefiore Medical Center Department of Social Medicine, in which many Einstein students have participated and which was the base for the work reported by Hu and Markowitz (1982) in the inaugural issue of the *Einstein Quarterly*.

calities with little restriction. The administration furthermore seeks to weaken rewards now given states that adopt good programs of protection against polluters, making those states subject to blackmail by industries that threaten to move out if in fact such protective measures are adopted.

EPA, under new leadership, already has proposed to allow a five-fold increase in emissions, highly dangerous, by heavy trucks including diesel-powered vehicles. The agency has also increased the danger of photochemical smog by proposing to allow a large increase in emissions of hydrocarbons. In several other areas of concern, such as emissions of particulates, the EPA has failed to set standards for diesel trucks and industrial boilers. Of special importance was the move of the EPA to allow increased use of lead in gasoline; and a propaganda campaign was mounted to show that lead emissions are not really harmful. As we go to press, we are happy to report that EPA and the Office of Management and Budget seem to have retreated on the matter of lead pollution, responding to public and professional concern by reversing their previous proposals and even suggesting a future decrease in the allowed level of lead added to gasoline. However, vigilance in this matter must be maintained.

The water resources of the United States are also threatened, in this case by sewage, sediments and toxic chemicals. There are over 100,000 dischargers of industrial wastewater in the United States. The Clean Water Act, passed in 1972 and strengthened in 1977, requires intermediate steps leading to the elimination of all discharge of pollutants by 1985. Considerable progress was being made toward that goal. However, the Reagan administration, among other delaying actions, has suspended for over one year the entire national pretreatment program that curtails toxic discharges into municipal waste treatment plants. In fact some critical parts of that program have been suspended indefinitely. Since January of 1981 the government has refused to issue a single regulation to limit toxic discharges and has requested extensions in court-ordered deadlines. It has also delayed action of the court-ordered responsibility of the EPA to clean up toxic "hot spots" of chemical pollution.

Even for substances for which the evidence of health hazard is clear, the EPA has retreated in its control responsibilities. For example, it has cut back on the efforts to identify schools in which building materials expose children to asbestos, and weakened the warning on asbestos in schools that had been approved by its own Science Advisory Committee. Parenthetically, one might infer that the lax attitude of the government on asbestos may have encouraged the Manville Corporation in its recent move

to declare bankruptcy in order to escape the necessity of paying for damages to health of asbestos workers.

The government has also reduced the resources needed to set regulations, required by Congress in the Toxic Substances Control Acts of 1976, to ban the use of polychlorinated biphenyls.

In the area of occupational health and safety, in addition to the attacks on NIOSH, whose budget corrected for inflation is scheduled in 1983 to be the lowest in its twelve-year history, the government has decimated the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the Department of Labor (Sidel, 1982). OSHA has responsibility for inspection of workplaces and enforcement of the standards that NIOSH and other agencies have developed. Thus OSHA, which even before 1981 was able only to perform a fraction of the needed inspections, is now confronted with massive cuts in numbers of inspectors, initial inspections and in follow-up inspections after violations of standards are found. Its ability to impose penalties also has been diminished, even though that already was too little to provide effective deterrence. Beginning in October, 1981, for example, OSHA exempted 73 per cent of all U.S. manufacturing companies from routine safety inspections. OSHA reversed its own previous advocacy of a strong cotton dust standard, part of the pattern in the Reagan administration of easing regulations protecting health in the workplace.

All of the above matters, we contend, must be of concern to physicians and other health workers. They are the ones who are called on to treat the inevitable victims of the pollution of the environment and of the hazards of the workplace. They are the ones who know, or who have good reason to suspect, what the long-term consequences of today's relaxed standards will be for the health of the nation in terms of cancer, heart and lung disease, neurological disease and birth defects. They are aware that the real economic loss is in the health of the American people undermined by removal of restrictions on pollution, and that the pretense that such restrictions in themselves are the cause of the present economic distress is pure fiction. Health workers and scientists must put their persuasiveness, based on special knowledge, at the service of those people and groups, including the various environmental organizations that prepared the Indictment, in order to defeat the attempts of the Reagan Administration to return us to the deadly smogs of the fifties and sixties, the poisoning of our waters, and the irrational dumping of toxic wastes. What physicians, scientists, and other health workers are doing so well in the anti-nuclear war movement must also be done in the environmental and occupational health arena.

## References

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