

The Cancer Mortality Rates

Harry Schwartz in his editorial-page article of November 15, "A Look at the Cancer Figures," recognizes that cancer is a "terrible disease" which claimed about 400,000 lives last year, but nevertheless maintains that "current expressions of cancerphobia" reflect "emotional panic- (or) extreme crusaders" rather than "intelligent and informed concern." Based on recent government statistics, Mr. Schwartz concludes that there has been only a "remarkably modest" increase of 2.5% in cancer mortality rates over the last decade, and that this can be accounted for by lung cancer deaths from smoking. Both these conclusions are substantially flawed.

The cancer mortality rates which Mr. Schwartz quotes were age adjusted to the 1940 U.S. population. More proper adjustment to age distributions of the current population, however, shows that the overall increase is more than twice as great as claimed. There has been an absolute increase of 5.5% in cancer mortality rates in just the seven year period from 1969 to 1976, when these rates are appropriately adjusted to the 1970 population. And the rates of increase among black males are about three times higher than the rest of the U.S. population. Still higher rates of increase in overall and organ specific cancer mortality rates have also been recently noted among various high risk population

sub-groups, such as workers exposed to a wide range of occupational carcinogens, notably asbestos, arsenic, benzene, chromium, nickel oxides, and petroleum fractions, in various petrochemical, and metallic and non-metallic mining and processing industries. Steep increases in age adjusted incidence rates have also been detected in high risk sub-groups of the general population, such as middle aged women treated with estrogens for menopausal symptoms. However, these more dramatic increases are masked when consideration is simplistically restricted to a single summary statistic or to overall national trends and averages.

The current reasoned government attempts to regulate carcinogens in our air, water, food and the workplace and to further limit a burgeoning cancer toll which now affects one in four of us and kills one in five should be welcomed. Facile denigration of such attempts as "hysteria" and "intrusion into private business of every sort" appears neither intelligent nor informed.

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