

The track record of a cancer educator

CHICAGO — The news [in your columns Sept. 28] that the Illinois division of the American Cancer Society is preparing a leaflet for their 1980 fund-raising campaign to "set the record straight" by listing substances that are known to cause cancer [carcinogens] and those that do not is most welcome. Of the myriads of chemicals now in common use, under 500 have been shown to be carcinogenic in animals, and 26 of these have also been studied in humans and found to be carcinogenic. It is well that the public should be reassured that the ability of chemicals to induce cancer is unusual, even when tested at high doses in animals, and is restricted to a relatively small number, which mostly belong to a few classes of synthetic organics.

Unfortunately, confidence in the future efforts of the Illinois division of the Society has been shaken by the accompanying statements of its senior executives minimizing the significance of the recent findings of nitrosamines in beer on the grounds that they have only been shown to cause cancer in animals, and that there has been no epidemic of bladder cancer in heavy beer-drinking countries in Europe. These qualifications fail to reflect a scientific consensus of the

strong presumption that chemicals found to cause cancer in proper animal tests will also cause cancer in humans. The experimental evidence for the carcinogenicity of nitrosamines is so strong that a recent WHO document emphasized that to all practical purposes they should be regarded as human carcinogens.

Of greater concern, however, is the track record of the national American Cancer Society which over the last decade has opposed or withheld support from most major legislative and regulatory efforts to reduce exposure to carcinogens in air, water, food, and the workplace. Instead, the Society has focused largely on individual responsibility for the prevention of cancer and has painted an overly optimistic picture of progress in our ability to cure cancer. In fact, the five-year survival rates for the major cancer killers such as lung, breast, and colon have not materially improved over the past 20 years.

The American Cancer Society should first educate itself before attempting to educate the public.

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