Cancer and the Environment

Five years ago, Steve Milloy and I wrote that there had been no epidemic of cancer in this country (“The Environmental Cancer Epidemic That Never Was,” Regulation, Vol. 19, No. 2). Professors Brad Radu and Philip Cole of the University of Alabama Medical School have now shown that, with the exception of one particular kind of cancer, cancer rates in the United States have been declining for a half-century (“The Fifty-Year Decline of Cancer in America,” Journal of Clinical Oncology, January 2001).

When Radu and Cole separated lung cancer mortality from all cancer mortality, they found that lung cancer mortality increased from 1950 through about 1990 and that mortality from all other cancers decreased. Beginning in about 1990, lung cancer mortality also began to decrease, and, as a result, total cancer mortality, from lung cancer and all other cancers, has been decreasing for about a decade. Even more promising, the rate of decline has increased since 1996.

The last paragraph of their three-page paper says:

The focus on all-cancer mortality also led to the widespread perception of a cancer epidemic caused by environmental pollution. A typical commentary blamed “increasing cancer rates” on “exposure to industrial chemicals and run-away modern technologies whose explosive growth has clearly outpaced the ability of society to control them” (reference omitted). There is no denying the existence of environmental problems, but the present data show that they produced no striking increase in cancer mortality. In reality, the cancer “epidemic” consisted of one disease, cancer of the lung, and was due to one lifestyle factor, cigarette smoking.

Before environmentalists dismiss Radu and Cole’s conclusions as evidence of their having been bought off by chemical manufacturers, they should read the footnote about the authors’ affiliations. Dr. Radu “was supported in part by an unrestricted gift from the United States Tobacco Company….”

No one can expect the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to give up expensive and unnecessary programs to control “environmental cancer.” After all, reports similar to Radu and Cole’s have been published since the early 1980s without effect. But, maybe, the disappearance of the cancer epidemic will strengthen the will of some members of Congress to stand in the way of the next stampede to blame “chemicals” for human health problems.

Wait a minute. Who am I kidding? Congress is too ready to indict chemicals and industry in general for any kind of health problem. Data and analysis haven’t, and aren’t, likely to stand in its way.

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