

War on cancer a medical Vietnam

By NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN

WASHINGTON (KFS) — The operations last fall on Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Rockefeller set off a mass-media avalanche that must have been at once frightening and comforting to many women. Along with the worrisome adjurations to give one's self frequent breast examinations, women were repeatedly told that early detection almost certainly means that things will work out all right.

Unhappily, the prospects for recovery aren't quite that good. Only 64 per cent of the women diagnosed as having breast cancer live five years longer. This is a four per cent improvement over the rate 15 years ago and is much better than cancer of the cervix or uteri, a disease for which expectations for survival have actually worsened in the same period of time.

These figures are drawn from an analysis of cancer statistics and how they are presented to the public in the January-February issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. The author is Daniel S. Greenberg, perhaps our finest science journalist, and the conclusion he comes to is that the war against cancer has turned into a medical Vietnam.

Greenberg says that not only have there been none of the breakthroughs we're always being promised, but that there really has been little if any progress in cancer treatment since the mid-1950s. He did find considerable improvement in the death rates between 1940 and 1955, attributable not to cancer cures, however, but to patients "surviving cancer operations that previously killed them."

Greenberg suggests that when the American Cancer Society announces that, "Cancer is one of

the most curable diseases in this country," it's basing its assertion on suspect statistics which are then presented to the public in a context of misleading optimism. No doubt this helps keep the collection plate full, just as it probably encourages Congress to continue kicking in \$600 million for cancer research every year.

Nevertheless, the cupidity, bureaucracy and entrenched obtuseness of the cancer industry can't entirely explain how this branch of medicine goes on failing with such unquestioning public support. Greenberg isn't the first person to say the cancer effort has dead-ended, but the objections do no good.

The tools of cancer therapy are weapon-like, and we believe in that also. Surgery, radiation, chemical warfare, all aggressive, intrusive and powerful, just the stuff to knock out tough enemies like the Viet Cong or a cancer cell. It's comforting for us to believe we have the kind of firepower therapy that can intervene to smash our biological opponents. Or we beat them with technological superiority as with the latest cancer gimmick, immunotherapy, which, Greenberg reports, wiser medical minds place little hope in.

What they do hold out hope for is cancer prevention. The greatest promise lies not in curing the disease, but in making sure people don't get it. Instead of big X-ray guns we should be looking at cigarettes, drinking water, food additives, air and nutrition in general. According to Greenberg, the amount of money being spent on nutritional research is "close to nil."

Part of the explanation is that people don't like to think about cancer and, when they do, they'd just as

soon think all those scientific folks in white smocks with retorts and pipettes know what they're doing. After all, if chemotherapy, radiation and surgery are statistically nearly indistinguishable from the fake cancer cures the quacks administer, where are we to place our hopes if the disease strikes us?

Then, the style of the prevailing medical approach is one we Americans cotton to. The "war" on cancer, the "attack" on cancer, or the phrases like mobilizing resources, massing scientific know-how to "beat" cancer, suits our way of thinking. We've been taught to conceive of diseases, too, as foreign invaders, as enemies.

The idea of preventive medicine is faintly un-American. It means, first of all, recognizing the enemy is us, and that we have to give up the idea that we can abuse ourselves and expect the doctors to put us back together when we have. It also means a different sort of practice of medicine, one in which the physician doesn't play the role of hero. Finally, of course, preventive medicine isn't gimmicky, aggressive or lucrative to the hospital, drug and medical equipment industries.

The times still aren't ready for such ideas. Congress is aching to pass a national health bill which will encourage yet more "heroic" cancer therapy. The Administration still thinks that clean water and air is a plot against the free enterprise system and would rather put the dough in bombers.

So, pray that Dr. Miraculous will find the cancer cure, and phone in your pledges to all medical telethons.

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Waste disposal is nuclear power's biggest problem

By JOHN MILLER

Nuclear power, the glamour technology of the '40s and '50s and the answer to our energy needs in the '60s, is now in the mid-1970s at the center of a nationwide controversy focusing on its safety, its need and its practicality. Today, according to the newly established Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), 53 commercial nuclear plants are licensed to operate, 54 are now being constructed (including the Trojan plant near Rainier, Oregon) and orders have been placed for an additional 109. (President Ford wants almost 150 more by 1985.) The NRC estimates that by the year 2000 more than 1,000 nuclear fission plants will be operating, providing from 30 to 60 per cent of the nation's energy needs. By comparison nuclear power provides about seven per cent of all electrical energy in the U.S. today. What all this adds up to is a strong push to make the U.S. dependent upon nuclear power by the turn of the century.

Despite these optimistic figures, the future of nuclear power is clouded. Within the last decade, in all parts of the nation supporters and opponents of nuclear power have been engaged in what could well be one of the most important debates in our nation's history. (See article by McKinley Olson detailing some of the current battles in *Nation*, Jan. 11, 1975.) To the critics of nuclear power the risks are too great. There is the risk of theft of fissionable material, the potential of human error resulting in catastrophic accident and the unknown effects of long term exposure to low level radiation which occurs with all nuclear plants. In addition, there is the question of whether we need all this "extra" energy, and if we do, can we afford it? (See the recent Ford Foundation study entitled, *A Time To Choose: America's Energy Future*.)

If these dangers and questions weren't enough to change the minds of those pushing nuclear power as the answer to our energy

problems, a recently released study by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) should.

The NRDC report focuses on the problem of nuclear waste disposal and points out that millions of gallons of deadly radioactive wastes will be one result if the United States pushes ahead with its planned large nuclear power program.

Nuclear power plants, like the Trojan plant here in Oregon, use enriched uranium as fuel and produce as waste toxic plutonium. A very small amount of plutonium contains enough radioactivity to make an entire city uninhabitable. In addition to its potency as a killer, the radioactivity of plutonium just doesn't go away. In fact, the nuclear wastes being produced by our nuclear plants today will remain dangerous for as long as 250,000 years. The NRC estimates that within ten years plutonium waste could amount to about 50,000 pounds a year, and that by 1995 there could be about 750 tons of waste plutonium sit-

ting around. Plutonium is also the "critical mass" ingredient for the A-bomb, thus the fear of theft.

What is being done with the waste now? For the most part, the waste fuel is being stored by local utilities in "temporary" steel canisters embedded in concrete containers. Until recently there hadn't been enough of the waste to worry the power companies. But now, according to the *Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 3, 1975), the local utilities are running out of storage space. Also, it finally dawned on the nuclear power industry that these temporary concrete tombs would eventually have to be moved, creating risks of exposure and accident. The dangers in "temporary" solutions to such long range problems as nuclear waste disposal should now be obvious following the disclosure last year by the defunct Atomic Energy Commission that over 430,000 gallons of poisonous nuclear waste had leaked into the soil around the government's own "temporary" nuclear waste disposal site at Hanford, Washington.

Thus added to the problems of possible theft, safety and cost, we are now confronted with what may be the most dangerous component of the nuclear fuel cycle, the disposal of the deadly plutonium waste. The scope of the problem confronting the proponents of nuclear power was recently summarized by Alvin N. Weinberg, former director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory when he asked, "is mankind prepared to exert the eternal vigilance needed to ensure proper and safe operation of its nuclear energy system?" Weinberg wasn't kidding when he said "eternal." No government has lasted 10,000 years let alone the 250,000 years over which nuclear wastes will remain "hot."

How sure can we be that there is such a place on earth where

these wastes could be stored that will remain safe from floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters over the coming quarter of a million years? The NRC is now looking, and with a little help from its nuclear power friends, it may find such a spot. (See *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 1975) The question is, do we want to take such a chance?

The question of nuclear waste disposal may soon come to a head if the NRC and/or Congress hold hearings on the plutonium issue. If such hearings are held, the key questions will center around the feasibility of storing and monitoring these dangerous wastes for what may well be eternity. In any case the decisions being made now are going to set a pattern for many generations to come.

What can you do now? If you are concerned about the problem of nuclear waste disposal, I urge you to write Mr. William Anders, Head of the NRC and your Congressman or woman urging them to hold open public hearings on the waste disposal problem, not just in Washington D.C., but around the nation. Closer to home, Sen. Ted Hallock, D-Portland, has introduced three bills (SB-120, 121, 127) which would refer to the people of Oregon a moratorium on nuclear power power plants construction. If approved by the voters of Oregon, these bills would halt construction of all nuclear power plants in Oregon for five years. I urge you to write to your state legislator expressing your support for such legislation. Perhaps the best way to solve the nuclear power waste problem is to pull the plug on nuclear power.

Miller is a doctoral student in sociology.

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'SIDDOWN, SCARPELLI! YOU CIA GUYS GET SO DAM' NERVOUS . . .'