

THE ENVIRONMENT IN RELATION TO A NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM

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When first contacted about meeting with this group today, I was assigned a subject area entitled, "The Role of the Environmentalist in a National Health Insurance Program". I grappled with this assigned subject for almost three months trying to come to terms with it and understand it. During this period of time, I contacted a number of political leaders and professional experts in an attempt to get a better handle on the subject. Within the past week or so, I decided that my bias indicates that there is no significant role for the environmentalist in a National Health Insurance Program. Therefore, I have taken the liberty of retitling this paper, "The Environment in Relation to a National Health Insurance Program". There is plenty of room to discuss the environment in relation to a National Health Insurance Program.

The very nature of a National Health Insurance Program is to develop an organized societal mechanism for the health care of individuals stricken with chronic, acute, episodic and catastrophic illnesses. The problem is real and the need is real. However, any such National Health Insurance proposal should be approached within a proper framework so as to insure that all related issues and all prerequisite problems are properly prioritized. Without these considerations, any National Health Insurance Program will be doomed to failure and skyrocketing costs. Proper protection of the environment and of the human animal in this environment is an issue that must be considered and appropriately addressed either prior to or in conjunction with National Health Insurance. National Health

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Insurance without a quality environment would be another case of a misplaced priority and improper timing.

When considering the environment in relation to National Health Insurance, it should be remembered that:

1. We already know enough about the adverse health consequences of a degraded environment to demand better environmental quality and more effective environmental programs. The hundreds of thousands of food-borne illnesses; the hundreds of thousands of known illnesses resulting from environmental chemicals; the millions of environmental injuries; the hundreds of thousands of deaths from home and industrial accidents; the hundreds of thousands of deaths or permanent damage from products coated with lead-based paints; the physical and mental consequences of incessant noise pollution; the documented cases of overexposure from diagnostic and therapeutic xrays; the unnecessary radiation from electronic products; the huge increase in the use of questionable chemical food additives; the pesticide residues on food crops; the traces of veterinary drugs in meat, milk and eggs; the known, proven consequences of various pollutants in our air and water - - - all attest to this fact.
2. We must constantly consider the sub-clinical, long-term and genetic effects of environmental insults as well as the more obvious clinical effects.
3. Children exposed to inferior environments may develop not just organic diseases but also distorted mental and emotional qualities.

With the foregoing examples of "knowns" in mind, we can now turn our attention to those things that must be addressed either prior to or in conjunction with any National Health Insurance effort.

We must have a better knowledge of the cost-benefits of health care as compared with the cost-benefits of a quality environment.

We must make certain that all environmental health and environmental protection agencies practice a mission of consumer protection.

We must ferret out and solve the conflicts of interest which pervade many environmental agencies and programs if we are to do a proper job of serving the public.

We must understand and practice the concept of having all of our environmental programs based on the multiple goals of health, safety, comfort, and well-being, not just "health" goals.

We must properly define and prioritize the environmental perils facing our citizens so as to most efficiently direct our efforts.

We must recognize that the struggle for environmental quality requires a wide array of diverse types of manpower not just the "environmentalist".

We must not let uninformed and naive politicians foster the erroneous belief that we cannot have both environmental quality and economic vitality.

We must insist that environmental protection standards and regulations be based on the needs of the environment and of man in his environment rather than on the latest polluter-professed "limits of technology".

We must insure that our programs are properly designed and directed to current problems rather than comfortable tradition.

We must develop an improved knowledge of the evolutionary sequence of the human animal. We can't understand where "a person is at until we understand where he has been and how he arrived where he is at."

We must insist that the Federal Congress continue to financially support programs and traineeships for qualified institutions involved in the graduate education of environmental health personnel.

We must recognize that there is a price to be paid for a quality environment but that this does not result in adverse economic consequences.

We must insist that environmental impact statements be used as a decision-making tool rather than a mechanism to justify environmentally adverse decisions already made.

We must begin to think of man as a part of his environment rather than as a supreme being in his environment.

We must constantly remind our citizen and political leaders that environmental quality goes beyond the mere freedom from air, water and waste pollution.

We must insist that all governmental leaders at all levels of government develop mechanisms to insure payment of the hidden and long-term costs of growth and pollution now instead of deferring these costs for future generations.

We must continue to emphasize the necessity of stabilizing population and reducing power consumption rather than considering only the alternatives of continued growth and increasing energy demands.

We must recognize that "everything is connected to everything else" and that the demise of species of wildlife is not something to be ignored as unrelated to human health, but, to the contrary, are advance indicators - - - early warnings - - - previews of coming attractions.

We must join forces with the ecologists, conservationists, and other environmental activists whenever appropriate instead of criticizing these "Johnnies-come-lately" and being so intent on territorial defense.

We must create, plan, and promote action instead of reacting, criticizing, and developing paranoia over the proposals of others.

We must make every effort to insure that government is truly responsive to the needs of the people.

We must increase efforts to better research, understand, and control those environmental factors which create health problems.

We must cooperate more effectively with citizen groups and accept the fact that citizens' actions have been a desirable stimulant and have been spurred laggard regulatory bodies to action.

We must demand that no significant environmental deterioration be permitted beyond current levels inasmuch as the environment, once degraded, is seldom restored.

We must counsel that, to regain a semblance of quality air in urban areas, alternative transportation methods and power sources must be developed and subsidized by public funds just as facilities to prevent water pollution are financed by tax funds.

We must guide national policy and priorities so that development of solar energy sources and mass transportation facilities prioritize as high as putting a man on the moon.

We must protect our environment in such a manner that future generations can enjoy the thrill of fresh brisk air, wilderness areas, trout in clear mountain streams, uncluttered mesas and vistas, wild geese on a cold morning, or solitude on a mountain peak.

It is a serious source of concern to me that the human animal sometimes seems more willing to adapt to pollution and congestion than to pay for environmental quality for this and future generations. Sometimes the human animal appears more willing to pay the hidden costs of pollution and congestion in terms of illness, society disorders, crime, and substandard enjoyment of living than to pay for the cost of retaining or regaining a high level of environmental quality. I have no doubt that the human animal can adapt to some degree of inferior environmental quality. But it is indeed scary that the human animal is willing to survive through adaption rather than to thrive through environmental quality.

Let's not allow our environmental programs (and in the long run, environmental quality) to be misplaced or left halfway between leprosy and the quarantine station. Let's make certain that environmental programs are effectively supported with or without National Health Insurance. Let's be certain that both programs, environmental quality and Health Insurance, are designed and operated in such a manner as to insure the greatest good for the largest number over the longest period of time.