CANCER, CHEMICALS, AND CORPORATIONS

As you might know, my family is a walking cancer cluster: three out of five of us had some form of cancer. What has frustrated me as I've lived through three bouts of cancer in my family was the cancer industry's focus on "curing cancer," with very little attention on preventing it. Particularly given how dangerous the "cures" for cancer are, it's high time we focused more attention on how we avoid it.

Which is why I'm happy that this report from the President's Cancer Panel is getting a good deal of attention. It talks about all the environmental hazards that may contribute to cancer, devoting an entire chapter exploring each of six kinds of exposures that may contribute to cancer:

- Exposure to Contaminants from Industrial and Manufacturing Sources
- Exposure to Contaminants from Agricultural Sources
- Environmental Exposures Related to Modern Lifestyles (things like automobile pollution, airplane travel, and cell phones)
- Exposure to Hazards from Medical Sources
- Exposure to Contaminants and Other Hazards from Military Sources (pointing to 900 abandoned military sites that are Superfund sites)
- Exposure to Environmental Hazards from Natural Sources

(things like radon and naturally occurring arsenic)

But as the report notes, one of the reasons Americans are exposed to so many potentially carcinogenic materials is that our regulatory system doesn't work.

> The prevailing regulatory approach in the United States is reactionary rather than precautionary. That is, instead of taking preventive action when uncertainty exists about the potential harm a chemical or other environmental contaminant may cause, a hazard must be incontrovertibly demonstrated before action to ameliorate it is initiated. **Moreover, instead of requiring industry or other proponents of specific chemicals, devices, or activities to prove their safety, the public bears the burden of proving that a given environmental exposure is harmful. Only a few hundred of the more than 80,000 chemicals in use in the United States have been tested for safety**.
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> U.S. regulation of environmental contaminants is rendered ineffective by five major problems: (1) inadequate funding and insufficient staffing, (2) fragmented and overlapping authorities coupled with uneven and decentralized enforcement, (3) excessive regulatory complexity, (4) weak laws and regulations, and (5) undue industry influence. Too often, these factors, either singly or in combination, result in agency dysfunction and a lack of will to identify and remove hazards. [my emphasis]

It elaborates in the expanded section on regulation to talk about regulatory capture.

> Like many other industries, the U.S. chemical, manufacturing, mining, oil,

> agriculture, transportation/shipping, and related industries are substantial political contributors and actively lobby legislators and policymakers on issues that affect their operations and revenue. For example, corporations aggressively block proposed chemical manufacturing, use, and disposal regulation, both through lobbying activities and in some cases, by manipulating knowledge about their products (e.g., industry-funded research).115,116 Although the Doll and Peto assessment of attributable fractions of the national cancer burden related to specific causes has been largely abandoned by the scientific community, it remains the basis of many existing chemical regulations and policy. The chemicals industry in particular likewise continues to use the notion of attributable fractions to justify its claims that specific products pose little or no cancer risk. As a result of regulatory weaknesses and a powerful lobby, the chemicals industry operates virtually unfettered by regulation or accountability for harm its products may cause.

This report came from the President's Cancer Panel, in a report telling Obama the shortcomings of our National Cancer Program. And it said that while there are a number of other controllable factors contributing to cancer (most notably smoking), we're simply not doing enough to even investigate these other possible causes of cancer.

With the BP spill, we're entering into a big discussion about whether our oil and gas habit is really safe and—more importantly—whether we even try to regulate it effectively. But at the same time, we ought to be having a wider discussion of the many ways (including our oil and gas addiction) that our modern lifestyles

lead to cancer.