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Cancer society panders to corporate donors
by Brian Moench

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When I ask audiences to raise their hand if someone they love has had cancer, almost every hand goes up. That's because 50 percent of men and 33 percent of women will get cancer in their lifetimes. One hundred years ago your chance of dying of cancer was 1 in 33. It is now 1 in 4.

That difference is not explained just by a longer life expectancy today giving us more years to develop cancer. Childhood cancer rates have risen 40 to 60 percent in the past 25 years.

Last week the President's Panel on Cancer announced a remarkable report echoing a message the Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment have been delivering for several years: Environmental degradation is responsible for a much larger portion of our cancer burden than previously thought.

Gathering the latest research from hundreds of new medical studies, the panel stated "the true burden of environmentally induced cancer has been grossly underestimated." They called for a paradigm shift in emphasis from treatment to prevention, and changing the search for causes from genes to environmental impacts on gene function -- a branch of science called epigenetics.

The World Health Organization has estimated that 80 percent of cancer and 30 percent of the world's overall disease burden is environmentally caused.

Sources of contaminants include pesticide residues in food, chemicals leaching from packaging, plastics, personal care products, radiation, and air and water pollution. The air inside the average home harbors more than 400 different chemicals, some originating from air pollution in the

community and others from household products. Common fruits and vegetables often contain residues of 60 or more different pesticides.

In their cover letter to President Obama, the panelists wrote, "American people -- even before they are born -- are bombarded continually with myriad combinations of these dangerous exposures."

Virtually from the moment of conception, human embryos in their mothers' wombs are contaminated by hundreds of environmental toxins capable of wreaking havoc even at infinitesimally low levels of exposure, leading to cancer, birth defects, diminished intellectual capacity, behavior disturbances and numerous chronic diseases later in life. Some of these environmentally caused epigenetic changes can be passed on to subsequent generations thus jeopardizing their health as well.

On many painful realities -- the climate crisis and a diminishing global oil supply come to mind -- scientists are already struggling to get the public and politicians to discard their denial pacifiers. An environment choked with carcinogens will be another reality for which denial will prove much more comforting. Ironically, the American Cancer Society (ACS) nurtures that denial.

Immediately after the report, the ACS issued essentially a rebuttal, criticizing it as speculative, and diverting attention from "more significant" factors like poor lifestyle choices -- smoking, overeating and lack of exercise. To suggest that Americans can only contemplate one cause of cancer is bewildering. But this "blame the victim" philosophy has been promoted by the ACS for more than 40 years, with a trivialization of environmental risks and a determined dismissal of new research.

Dr. Samuel Epstein, author of *The Politics of Cancer* and former head of a congressional committee on cancer, is only one of many critics who argue the ACS "priorities remain fixated on after the fact damage control -- screening, diagnosis, and treatment" -- to the virtual exclusion of cause and prevention.

The ACS has long-standing conflicts of interest with a wide range of industries that manufacture chemotherapy drugs, agrichemicals and radiation therapy equipment. In fact, ACS spokesman Dr. Michael Thun admits the society's corporate connections.

"The American Cancer Society views relationships with corporations as a source of revenue for cancer prevention," said Dr. Thun. "That can be construed as an inherent conflict of interest, or it can be construed as a pragmatic way to get funding to support cancer control." Or it can be construed as what it is: undermining cancer prevention for financial gain -- like the Goldman Sachs of health care.

It's hard to think of an issue that reaches deeper into our personal lives than cancer.

Six members of my family have had cancer, including two of my children. They illustrate the need to emphasize prevention over treatment. If the ACS can't muster the integrity to help prevent environmentally induced cancer it should at least stop obstructing the efforts of others who try.

Brian Moench is a founder of Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment.