Action against cancer

Despite all the increases in our knowledge of the causes of cancer the incidence of the disease in Western countries shows no signs of decline. As recently as the 1950s epidemiologists believed that only 10% of cancers were due to environmental carcinogens; now the proportion is put at around 80%. In principle virtually all these environmentally induced cancers could be avoided—yet little is being achieved.

The problems in translating epidemiological knowledge into changes in behaviour were discussed at an international conference in St Vincent, Italy, last month. The priorities are plain enough: primary prevention requires action against smoking, reducing consumption of dietary factors such as fats and salt, and reducing exposure to specific chemical and industrial carcinogens. Secondary prevention includes regular smear tests for cervical cancer, teaching breast self-examination, and other screening programmes.

The European Organisation for Co-operation in Cancer Prevention Studies, one of the organisers of the conference, was formed last year to look for ways to improve the public acceptance of these two kinds of prevention. Journalists present at the conference explained that newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting services could help in this process but that necessarily their main concerns had to be with information and entertainment rather than with education. Journalists wanted news—new drugs, technical innovations in surgery and investigations, and human interest stories. The simple messages of primary cancer prevention could not be repeated endlessly if readers' and listeners' attention and interest were to be captured and held.

A K Jonas, of the American Cancer Society, described how the United States, almost alone among Western countries, had succeeded in lowering its national consumption of tobacco. The key factors had been credible statistics and persuasion of opinion-makers and image-formers. Commercials on American television relied heavily on the use of famous actors, singers, and other public personalities. Top advertising agencies were used to prepare publicity material. Smokers were not attacked—the abuse of tobacco was seen as a health issue, not as a moral issue.

If indeed Western populations are to be persuaded to adopt a healthier life style their governments will need to do more than simply disseminate information. Experience with road safety (seat belts, motor-cycle helmets, alcohol and driving, pedestrian crossings) has shown the limitations of education campaigns. If Governments are really concerned to lower the incidence of cancer they will need to examine possibilities ranging from financial incentives and disincentives to legal restrictions and controls. Meanwhile health educationists need to make more use of commercially proved means of altering behaviour, with advertising and other psychological measures. Perhaps the cancer research charities could find ways to spend more on propaganda on North American lines; or possibly Britain, like the United States, needs a cancer charity primarily concerned with modification of behaviour.

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