

Letter from Chicago

Looking for solutions

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Recently a financial editor suggested that the United States government should nationalize the narcotics industry and set up a central agency to take over the production and distribution of drugs. He thought that the agency should be staffed by law enforcement officers, pushers, dealers, growers, and consumers to avoid sudden unemployment at home and economic disasters abroad. Though worried about causing an agricultural recession and massive foreclosures of poppy growers' huts, he thought that on the whole the population would be unaffected. Judging by the performance of the United States post office, he reasoned that the danger of narcotics reaching the consumer would be remote and that most addicts would be driven to drink waiting for a fix.

Extending this concept we might also consider nationalizing private colleges and universities. This would bring them to the level of those government schools where pupils can neither read nor write but are merely training for future work in the above mentioned narcotics agency. Then you could nationalize the junk food industry in order to win the war on cholesterol. Taking over private hospitals would stop overinvestigation once the waiting time for a chest x ray examination reached seven days; and a government takeover of the pharmaceutical industry would save millions by cutting down the flood of new drugs. By the same token federal agencies could also manufacture spectacles, hearing aids, wheelchairs, and even academic chairs to bring the medical industrial complex to its knees. The Pentagon, instead of buying expensive screwdrivers and toilet seats from private firms, could try making its own missiles and rockets with such efficiency that peace would reign on earth for ever.

Advantages of nationalizing reproduction

Should the government also take over the reproductive industry? If babies were to be grown in bottles they might be able to flourish in a cocaine free environment. For selected children the federal agency could put up the narcotics in a trust and release them on the 13th birthday for their personal use. As it is, smoking cocaine has become a veritable epidemic among the mostly unmarried mothers of the inner city ghettos, where children have children and the infant mortality is about 18 per 1000 live births. Here about one third of prospective mothers receive no prenatal care, largely because of ignorance, lack of motivation, inadequate clinics with long waiting lines and impersonal care, and the fear that the babies of addicted mothers would be taken away. A background of squalor, malnourishment, and domestic violence is now compounded by cocaine, leading to premature small babies being born with damaged lungs or brains. Some of these babies need to be maintained on a respirator for several weeks, and some end up quadriplegic or mentally retarded. Compared with the \$500 needed for providing prenatal care, society then has to bear the cost of about \$24 000 to treat a premature baby in a specialized nursery for 20 days or about \$1 million to care for a handicapped person for the rest of his or her life.

Yet solutions are hard to come by in this setting, the answers being social and economic rather than medical. Furthermore, the problems of the inner city underscore the overall achievement of

a nationwide reduction in infant mortality, this having declined from 25 deaths per 1000 live births in 1965 to 10 in 1987. Some students of health care think that it is unfair to compare the United States with the small homogeneous countries such as Finland and Sweden that have death rates of about six per 1000 births. Instead, they contend, the United States should be matched against countries of similar size and population heterogeneity, such as, for instance, the socialist Soviet Union, where an overall infant mortality of 25 per 1000 live births exceeds the 18 per 1000 mortality of America's worst slums.

For or against cockroaches

Meanwhile, the common cockroach, a sturdy survivor of over 300 million years, continues to do well. Believed to have originated in Africa, as I reported in my April 1981 letter, cockroaches comprise some 3500 related species. They prefer to live in kitchens and eat copiously but only once in 24 hours; are hard to drown because they wax their cuticles; resist armies of exterminators and quickly become resistant to new pesticides but are susceptible to boric acid; and are sent into a frenzy by the sound of a switch but not by light. I was first exposed scientifically to them in medical school when I had to purchase a male and a female to learn for no apparent reason that their mouth parts consisted of a proximal cardo, a distal stipes, and a chitinous hook called the hamadens. Later I learnt that the emperor Nero used the ground up intestines of cockroaches to relieve his earache and that they have at their rear peg like cerci that function like antennae and detect the slightest air movement. They are photophobic and live in the dark, can survive without water for two weeks and without food for three, and are truly omnivorous. Having a heart in each leg, they can run at a meter a second, the equivalent of over 70 km/h for man, and they can vanish into cracks by flattening their bodies. If a cockroach is decapitated its heart may beat for up to 30 hours, and females may lay another batch of eggs before dying. Belying their reputation, cockroaches are meticulously clean, forever washing themselves and eating in the process whatever sticks to their bodies.

Some years ago scientists, in response to a widespread anticockroach feeling, developed a pheromone analogue that would stop them from growing and reproducing, even inducing males to attempt to mate with each other. But more recently cockroach-human relations have undergone a detente as a chemophobic, ecology minded public has come to fear the insecticides more than their intended victims. Scientists now claim that cockroaches are basically harmless, no more likely to spread disease than cats, babies, or shoes, and that they play a useful role in decomposing non-biodegradable waste. Yet all this may be no more than a Prague spring, man's antipathy toward these maligned insects being likely to prevail. In the long run, the sturdy cockroach is likely to be around long after man has blasted himself off this planet with nuclear weapons. In the immediate future, however, pesticide makers may well experience a slump. This could require nationalizing the industry and setting up a federal agency to develop and implement plans for an all out anticockroach crusade.