

REMARKS

by

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House of Representatives, U. S. Congress

This is the second time within the past six months that I have been privileged to attend the opening of a new research facility of the Public Health Service. The first was your parent agency, the Communicable Disease Center at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, a facility in which you and the Nation can take justifiable pride.

We can be equally proud of the field station we are opening today. Like the Center's headquarters, it is located on the campus of one of the Nation's great universities - an ideal place for research. The building and the equipment in this Station have been designed and selected to give our scientists every advantage in their search for answers to the still unsolved problems of disease.

The University and its friends, whose great generosity brought this building into being, and the people of the Nation who will pay to keep it operating - we all expect great things from the studies that will be conducted in this new research facility. And I know that the men and women who will labor here will do their utmost to see that we are not disappointed.

To be delivered at opening ceremonies of the Communicable Disease Center Laboratory, Public Health Service, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Kansas City, Kansas, Wednesday, April 5, 1961.

The study of virus and fungus diseases for which this Station was established demonstrates the importance of a much broader research area that we are only beginning to explore, namely, the whole relationship of man's modern environment to his health.

It was at this Station, in its old makeshift quarters, that one of the truly great research breakthroughs of this century occurred. I refer, of course, to the work done here on histoplasmosis. Thousands of patients were erroneously treated in tuberculosis sanitarium, tens of thousands of dollars were wasted on such treatment, before your work here revealed that it was a fungus in the soil, not the tubercle bacilli, that was rotting the lungs of so many people in this section of the country.

In the dramatic story of histoplasmosis research I believe there is a lesson that we as a Nation will do well to heed.

It was when our scientists began to look for factors in the environment, rather than within man himself, that they found the source of histoplasmosis in soil rich in bird droppings. Isn't it also possible that more intensive study of our environment will yield clues to the prevention of other diseases?

I ask, is it just a coincidence that lung cancer, emphysema and other respiratory ills are increasing in the areas where there is most air pollution? What is the connection between hepatitis epidemics, broken down sewage systems, septic tank suburbias? Why are heart disease and mental ills such big problems in the urbanized parts of the world and almost unknown in the so-called underdeveloped countries? We can't expect our doctors to give us all the answers. We must study the environment itself.

We are not doing this. Worse, we are not even doing the simple ordinary things we already know we ought to do to protect ourselves in this fast changing world.

Within the next 15 years, we are going to build the equivalent of 12 cities as large as Chicago to take care of our increasing population. If we follow our present pattern, we will do it on a day by day, hit or miss way. Invade more and more farmlands with housing developments and shopping centers. Add new highways when the old ones can't bear any more cars. Bulldoze down more forests to make room for more industries. Sewage and refuse will be handled in whatever way seems easiest and cheapest at the moment. Maybe heavy chemical dosage will keep our drinking water safe.

The only comfort we can take in this hodgepodge is that, because each day's changes are slight, we are saved from the shock of the sum total of change that results in a year, or a decade. The impact of the whole horrible mess we are creating never really hits us.

Yet we have warning signs aplenty that we are following a dangerous road.

In a certain section of Tennessee, you can see a strange sight - a grey, desolated wasteland right in the midst of an area of green flourishing forests. There isn't a bird, or a blade of grass, or any life at all in the wasteland. Why? Air pollution - smoke and fumes from an industrial plant miles away. Is this the air you want to breathe?

That's the effect of air pollution you can see, But there's another kind you can't see and it may be the most dangerous of all. It spouts from the tailpipe of your car. It spouts from 70 million other cars. And you breathe this devil's brew. When a snowstorm hit New York City last February and cars were barred from the city for two days, air pollution dropped 60 percent. The auto industry has been mighty enterprising about getting us push button windows and tailfins and a lot of other gadgets we could do without. But what about devices that will stop air pollution? What about seatbelts that would prevent fatal accidents?

It is time and over-time for the auto industry to show that it cares as much about our health and safety as it does about our comfort.

Other industries also are big, are growing, are polluting air, land, food, water. Must these industries pollute as fast as they grow?

Thousands of entirely new chemicals are being used every year with no study of the possible effect of lifetime exposure to them. One of the few chemicals that has been thoroughly studied is the fluoride used in drinking water to prevent tooth decay - a measure found to be entirely safe and beneficial. Ironically enough, this measure has encountered public opposition while, at the same time, there is virtually no public concern over the thousands of unstudied chemicals we are absorbing into our bodies every day.

Radioactivity is another hazard we know little about. The more we learn, the more we realize how careful we must be to cut down unnecessary exposure.

But we aren't doing it. The medical and dental uses of X-ray have increased over 300 percent in the past 20 years. But how many communities have any regular system for checking whether the X-ray machines in doctors' and dentists' offices are operating properly? I know of just one - New York City -

and it's just getting started. In 17 States, shoe stores can still use fluoroscopic shoe-fitting machines - machines that are giving hundreds of children unnecessary doses of dangerous radiation.

The Atomic Energy Commission is promoting more use of atomic energy and radioactive materials in industry. That's fine. That's progress - provided it can be done safely. But what worries me is that this same AEC, which is responsible for promotion, is also responsible for protection. That's like putting a wolf to guard the sheep. I, for one, don't like it. Last summer, when a spillover from a uranium plant in New Mexico poured a quarter of a million gallons of radioactive stuff into the San Juan River, the health authorities didn't even know about it until citizens 65 miles downriver reported dead fish floating by. I say our health agencies, Federal, State, and local, should have clear-cut responsibility for the health and safety factors of radiation. But along with that responsibility must go the funds and the personnel to do the job. Most State and local health departments today are doing so little in radiation control it is hardly worth mentioning. I also think the Federal Public Health Service program is too little and too late.

Water pollution is another environmental hazard - an old story to those of you who live along the Missouri River, sometimes called the "thousand-mile sewer". I understand, however, that both Kansas City, Kansas, ^{and} Kansas City, Missouri,

have done their part to give the old river a better reputation. Kansas City, Missouri's overwhelming vote last fall of over four to one in favor of the bond issue for sewage treatment facilities is an inspiring example of enlightened citizen action. It was almost as impressive as the 6 to 1 vote Kansas City, Kansas, gave its bond issue in 1954.

Those were battles well won, but the big war for water is still ahead. Within two generations, there's been a radical shift in our living patterns. Families who used to have five rooms and a path now have five rooms and a bath-or even two or three baths. They also have dishwashers and clothes washers and air conditioning systems - all taking water. And at the same time that we are using more water, we're polluting more water. Housewives are using millions of pounds of detergents. If you draw a glass of water from the tap on wash day in some communities, it foams like a glass of beer. Industries are using 10 times as much water as they did 60 years ago. We still have some pure streams - but they're pure chemical, not pure water.

My own State of Rhode Island, along with 22 other States, has a big shellfish industry. This industry has been outstanding in its insistence that its fish be raised in wholesome waters. It is proud of its record. But that record is getting more and more difficult to maintain. Even the ocean is getting polluted as we dump more and more radioactive and other waste into it. Recently, down in Mississippi, some shellfish poachers took their crop from a polluted area. This was quickly discovered and action

taken - but not before over 100 people got hepatitis. As water gets scarcer, the temptation to use unsafe water grows. Last month it was a shellfish poacher in Mississippi. Next month, it may be a farmer, or an industry, and you and I may be the victims.

Where are the health officials, the food and drug inspectors and all the other people we pay to protect us from such hazards? They are on the job, I can assure you. But there aren't enough of them and the problem is growing so fast both in size and complexity that they can't keep up with it.

Maybe you've noticed - I have - the deterioration in the food served on planes, trains and buses. Maybe you've noticed - I have - that there have been a number of cases of food poisoning on these carriers. There were two or three on airlines last fall; a big one on a railroad in Washington, D. C., a couple of years ago. It's the job of the U. S. Public Health Service to see that passengers get safe food, but how many inspectors do they have? How many to protect the millions of people who are traveling every day? I'll tell you. They have exactly 31. Is it surprising that the food service is deteriorating? I'm surprised that it is safe to eat at all when you travel.

What can you and I and every other American do to make this modern world safe and to keep it that way? What can we do about air pollution, radiation, water pollution, food poisoning and all these other hazards?

One thing we can do is use our specialists, give them a chance to apply their knowledge of how to control pollution and create safer cities. To do that, we must recognize that, for better or for worse, most of us, and those who come after us, are going to live in about 200 densely populated areas. This means that we must think, plan and act in terms of a whole metropolitan complex, not in terms of each separate city and suburb. No part of the complex can hope to wall itself off from the problems of the other parts. Build a fine home in the suburbs if you want to, but remember you can't shake off the big city and its problems. It is still your city - you couldn't live without it.

So, whatever town or suburb you call home, be prepared to pay for metropolitan living - one way or another. You can pay for it by damage to health, by inconvenience, by ugliness and increasingly unpleasant living conditions if you continue to let matters drift. Or you can pay for programs that will give you and your descendants a decent place to live. The choice is still ours, but we'll have to make it soon, because once buildings are up and pavements are down, it's too late.

The second thing we can do is expand our research program. We need to know the precise effect our rapidly changing environment is having upon our health. We need to find better and cheaper ways of building health protections into our environment.

To get research of the scope needed and at the speed needed, I have proposed that a National Environmental Health Center be established, comparable to the National Institutes

of Health, the world's greatest medical research center.

This ceremony, marking as it does the opening of a new facility for studying two hazards of the environment (viral and fungal diseases), seems to me an appropriate time to announce that my proposal for a National Environmental Health Center has now reached the blueprint stage.

This Center should have many buildings as fine as this new field station. It should have over 30 different types of laboratories where physicists, chemists, radiologists, biochemists and other scientists would do research. The problems they might solve by such research would help all communities to have better and cheaper control of their environment. The Center should be equipped with greenhouses and with a farm of experimental animals so that, by testing pollutants on lower forms of life, we could learn more about their effect on man. Scientists from all parts of the world should be trained in this Center.

Like the National Institutes of Health, the Environmental Health Center should be the hub for an expanding national program. It should provide grants to universities and other research installations in all parts of the country. It should serve as a clearinghouse and coordinating unit to prevent duplication of effort and to see that every promising clue is being followed.

The Nation's most productive years of medical research came with the development of our National Institutes of Health. It spurred on the whole medical research movement, producing

results far beyond those that can be directly traced to NIH resources.

Similarly, I predict that, if we can develop a great national center for environmental research, it will mark the turning point from neglect to aggressive attack upon the health problems of the modern environment.

Before such a Center can move from the blueprint to the brick and mortar stage, however, we must know whether the American people want it. There is no use perfecting our ability to create healthful, beautiful and convenient cities if we are going to ignore this knowledge and go on creating ugly, Jerry-built, traffic-jammed urban sprawls.

The Congress of the United States, responding to the will of the people, took medical research out of the doldrums. Surgery is safer; diseases and disabilities that used to be hopeless are now curable because we've gone all out for a big national medical research program.

We can do the same to make our environment safer. President Kennedy, in his messages on natural resources and on urban affairs, pointed out the danger of neglect. He called for more action on air pollution, water pollution, metropolitanism. But he hasn't spelled out his proposals. Will they be big enough? Will they come fast enough?

We stand at a turning point right now. We can silently accept a future of cancer-laden smog and sewage-burdened waters or we can rise up and demand action, big action, fast action throughout the length and breadth of the land. The choice is ours, but time is running out.

Some of us, some of our children, may already have absorbed the poisons that, working slowly in our bodies, will find their fatal targets 10 or 20 years from now. That's how modern pollution works - slow, but deadly.

In this field station we dedicate today, we have taken one step in the right direction. Let us follow it with the giant stride that will enhance the potential of this and of every other center for genuinely productive research.

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