

## LETTERS

### Health: Whose Responsibility?

John H. Knowles' recent editorial "Responsibility for health" (16 Dec. 1977, p. 1103) is terribly American: it puts the responsibility for an individual's health squarely on the individual. The gist of the argument is that "the idea of a 'right' to health should be replaced by that of a moral obligation to preserve one's own health" through better habits, intelligence, and the individual's will. Otherwise, the spiraling costs of health care will continue to rise, and so will the level of our collective frustration. Where, in that argument, is the responsibility of society, and the responsibility of its government, for our less fortunate citizens? What about society's contributions to illness itself?

We are not reminded in the editorial that a greater proportion of people get sick when they are poor—according to countless reliable studies—and that poverty in the United States is not predominantly self-inflicted. Not at all. Nor are we reminded that intelligent, voluntary use of health care services is related to social class, and that choice of class (and associated income or educational level) are hardly matters that are solely within an individual American's control. Knowles does not remind us, either, that man-made environmental conditions have something to do with man-made illness.

Finally, there is the relatively recent phenomenon in modern life [recognized in Knowles' book (1), from which his editorial is drawn] that most disease today is chronic rather than acute. We suffer from cancer, heart disease, diabetes, back disease, arthritis, and chronic respiratory illness. Those who suffer from these diseases have not chosen them, and medical science can do little more than make palliative gestures on behalf of the sufferers. [See, for instance, the excellent article in (1) by Thomas (pp. 35–46).] Those who suffer mostly from chronic illness are, again, the aged and the poor—especially the aged poor—whose symptoms are more likely to be both exacerbated and increased by their living conditions. How is the individual habit and will—to use Knowles' terms—to rectify that situation?

Do not society and its government share some of the responsibility for the national health problem—let alone the inadequate scope and shape of its health care system? Much as I respect Knowles' other work and writing, I see his editorial as not merely missing the mark but as putting technical and moral

burdens on the wrong party. If we continue to go that route (the English are being given the same advice by some of their medical authorities), we only increase the problems of health care and the burdens of those who suffer from the inadequacies of both our health care system and our society.

ANSELM L. STRAUSS

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#### References

1. J. H. Knowles, Ed., *Doing Better and Feeling Worse: Health in the United States* (Norton, New York, 1977).

Congratulations and a note of thanks are due John H. Knowles for his eminently reasonable and succinct statement on the responsibility for health. With clarity and persuasiveness, he addresses an important issue that is intimately linked to providing good health care for all people. Unless individuals assume more responsibility for their own health, the goal of providing good health care probably will not be brought any closer by simply expanding the present health delivery system. For most adult individuals, the likelihood of a change in philosophy or motivation is minimal. But the youth of our society can be informed about human biology, about prevention of common diseases, about the physician's limited effectiveness in dealing with "after-the-fact" illness, and about the responsibility for their own health as they reach adulthood.

As Knowles indicates, a "beneficent government" cannot solve the mounting health problems of our nation by the knee-jerk reflex initiation of more comprehensive and burdensome nationwide health care programs. The problem is too large and will require coordinated approaches from many different directions. If the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government were truly responsive and altruistic, there would be closer consultation and cooperation with leaders in the biomedical community.

It should be recognized that if there is a "right" to health then there are the attendant responsibilities of the individual, who with the help of society and perhaps a benevolent government can be informed about important aspects of preventive medicine.

JACK C. SIPE

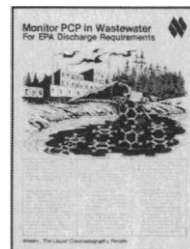
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I appreciate very much the letters from both Strauss and Sipe. The editorial was abstracted from my essay in *Doing*

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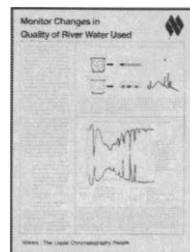


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*Better and Feeling Worse*, and I hope Strauss will read the essay. After calling for individual responsibility and specifying the simple practices for healthy living, I concluded: "These simple rules can be understood and observed by the majority of Americans, namely the white, well-educated, and affluent middle class. But how do individuals in minority groups follow these rules, when their members include disproportionately large numbers of the impoverished and the illiterate, among whom fear, ignorance, desperation, and superstition conspire against even the desire to remain healthy? Here we must rely on social policies *first*, in order to improve education, employment, civil rights, and economic levels, along with efforts to develop accessible health services."

Surely Strauss knows how I feel about the aged and the poor. We are not at odds with each other, and my writing over the years has been consistent and is entirely consonant with Strauss's values.

JOHN H. KNOWLES  
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## Jensen's Election as a AAAS Fellow

Two statements concerning the election last year of Arthur Jensen as a AAAS fellow have been sent to the AAAS Council. They were largely circulated by the International Committee Against Racism and were signed by 335 people, consisting mainly of faculty, staff, and graduate students of seven institutions. Some 100 additional signatures endorsing a similar statement have since been received. Although the texts of these statements differ slightly, all strongly protest Jensen's election and demand that the granting of this honor be rescinded. Jensen's conclusions on the heritability of intelligence depend on unscientific methodology and interpretations. They are tied, in part, to and continue the spirit of Cyril Burt's work. Leading scientists have now become "convinced that Burt published false data and invented crucial facts to support his controversial theory that intelligence is largely inherited" (1). This work figures strongly in the formulation of racist social policies.

His election as a fellow legitimates such antisocial doctrines and declares to the world community that the AAAS is willing to honor American scientists whose work serves the cause of racism. An alarming parallel to events in Germany in the 1930's is suggested.

Considering the terrible human and

## Say goodbye to a couple of troublemakers.

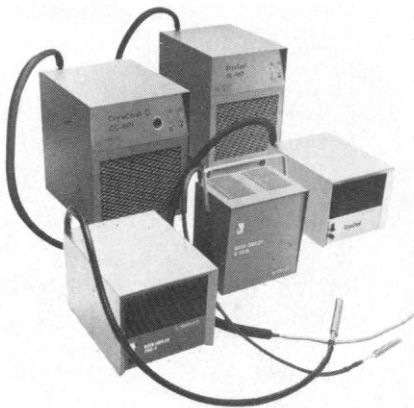
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