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Hazards of the '60's

Recent hearings before Representative John E. Fogarty's subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations brought out the difficulties inherent in getting congressional and public support for a broad-scale program in public health designed to meet the needs of the 1960's. Officials of the Public Health Service and other witnesses were in virtually complete agreement about what the hazards to health will be and about what will have to be done about them.

The hazards will increase as our expanding population concentrates more in urban areas. By 1970 the U.S. population will probably have increased by more than 30 million, the number of automobiles by some 20 million. Industry will undoubtedly increase at an even more rapid rate. The chemical industries, which pose special environmental problems, have grown exponentially in the last few decades and will probably continue to do so. From 1940 to 1959 the output of some representative chemicals increased as follows (in millions of pounds): plastics, 150 to 5000; detergents (which introduce special disposal problems), 15 to 1300; and insecticides and agricultural chemicals, 8 to 540. It is estimated that 400 to 500 new chemical products are put into use each year. In the production of these, new waste products are created. A continuing program of checking the toxicity of new products and by-products is a clear necessity.

The increasing use of x-rays in diagnosis and in industry, the rapidly expanding use of radioisotopes in industrial applications and research, and the increasing use of nuclear power will require control and monitoring. The disposal of radioactive wastes from nuclear facilities will demand more and more attention. All of these hazards, as well as others not mentioned, are designated environmental health problems by the Public Health Service.

What needs to be done? At present, according to Leroy E. Burney, surgeon general, the plans and activities developed by the Public Health Service for dealing with environmental hazards are carried out somewhat independently of each other, in response to special needs. "This has resulted in a loose grouping of related, but independently treated, problems, programs, and activities associated with the essential elements of our surroundings—the water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we eat, the shelter which protects us. . . ." Burney proposed—and all witnesses concurred—that what is needed is an organization to consider the interrelated problems as a whole, an "Environmental Health Unit," which would integrate biomedical and engineering activities and bring about close relations between operational and research activities. Such a unit should carry on an expanded research program of its own but should also support research in universities.

Two steps are required: first, legislation to establish an Environmental Health Unit within the service, and second, adequate financing. The first step is easy, the second hard. And it is obvious why this is so. A specific disease can be dramatized: "Fight cancer with a check-up and a check!" But the environmental hazards are diffuse and difficult to personify in a way that will loosen congressional or individual purse strings. Fogarty remarked, "Environmental health doesn't seem to ring a bell with many people. . . ." Burney agreed that the phrase lacked "drama or impact," but had no substitute to offer. Come in, Madison Avenue!—G.DuS.