

Towards a Green Approach to Health Care: The Capitalist System vs. The Immune System, and the fight for free universal health care in the United States

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The fight for free, universal health care is even more critical today than it was a decade ago when Hillary and Bill Clinton sacrificed it to the greed of the insurance companies and HMOs. Yes, health care must be made a right, not a privilege. But we would be remiss if we were to limit our platform to the fight to equalize access to health care delivery in the United States without also addressing the quality of that care, and what is causing so many people to be sick to begin with.

Public hospitals are reeling from the whip of privatization, and we must of course stay the hand that wields the whip; but, in reality, hospitals are little more than assembly-line butcher shops anyway in which drugs and invasive surgical procedures are prescribed as a matter of course by alleged experts schooled only in the reductionist constructs of western industrial medicine -- helpful in acute emergencies, but devastating in terms of general public health.

As a result,

- hysterectomies and episiotomies are unnecessarily carving up women at rates three or four times higher than in Europe .
- infant mortality in the U.S. is worse than in any industrialized country in the world.
- frontal lobotomies and Electro-Shock Therapy for treating depression and other ailments are making a comeback.
- chemotherapy and radiation remain the preferred treatment for cancer despite showing no percentage increase in cancer cures for forty years.
- twenty-one percent of Black American children have harmful quantities of lead in their blood, compared with 8.9 percent of all U.S. children, according to the NY Times (Feb. 7, 1996).
- and, studies show what AIDS activists have long known -- that early intervention with AZT, which is extremely toxic, has no beneficial, and quite likely severe deleterious effects that further compromise the immune system.

On the other hand, acupuncture clinics have among the highest success rates in treating people for various drug addictions (including tobacco and heroin), as well as in anaesthetizing patients without the use of drugs. And all sorts of non-invasive herbal and botanical treatments offer successful, natural and cheap remedies to many conditions.

Yet none of the proposed national health legislation -- not even the much needed "single payer" proposals (the Canadian model) -- covers any of them. Acupuncture, air and water filtration, a toxic-

free environment, herbal, botanical and homeopathic remedies, free abortion and contraception on demand (including condoms), midwifery and homebirth, organically-based foods and nutrient supplementation, chiropractic, Ibogaine (which cures heroin addiction), medical marijuana, clean needle exchanges, powerful alternative cancer treatments, yoga and stress reduction, and massive non-toxic, holistic treatments for AIDS all are driven to the margins of acceptability. Most alternative therapies are viciously opposed by drug companies (which see them as a potential threat to their profits), the American Medical Association and their hip-pocket congressional reps.

All of the legislation that has come before Congress -- including single payer -- would further entrench today's medical orthodoxy and suppress alternative programs and immune-boosting, non-invasive therapies. The Food and Drug Administration's raids and arrests of legitimate alternative medicine providers and outlets, and its ongoing attempts to make vitamins and other nutrient supplements available only by prescription, are the latest attacks on green medicine on behalf of the established orthodoxy.

Welcome to capitalism's Brave New World Order: Assemblyline health care, where we shall be medicated, bio-genetically altered, pesticided, toxicated and guinea-pigged by the experts, all duly recorded in computer chips now being experimentally implanted under the skin of human beings, along with all other information about our lives deemed relevant by the powers that be -- our arrest records, travel logs, and so forth -- to be accessed at the whim of police or medical officials controlling a scanning device.

Sedition or Sedation?

The most widespread successes in reducing disease earlier in this century were accomplished not by medical intervention but primarily by providing access to decent sanitation, clean water and healthy food. Only when the acute need arose did the administration of antibiotics make a difference.

Despite -- and maybe because of -- the huge levels of antibiotics used in the U.S. today (not only for medication in people but, especially, in animal feed), diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia are making a comeback. Residents of poor areas which have suffered inordinate government cutbacks in sanitation and social services, and prisoners are the most susceptible. Infections such as encephalitis and influenza have skyrocketed in the general population for periods of a few months at a time immediately following nuclear bomb tests and mass spraying of pesticides; high rates of leukemia and thyroid disease are the norm in the proximity of regularly-functioning nuclear power plants, and afflict great numbers of people for hundreds of miles following accidents like Chernobyl and Three Mile Island.

Hunger and malnutrition in children, lead poisoning, AIDS, cancer, chronic fatigue, breast cancer, multiple sclerosis, multiple chemical sensitivities, and occupational diseases like brown lung are rampant. These diseases are all systemic in origin, caused by intensive industrial production's ravaging of the environment and, consequently, our immune systems. Our bodies are increasingly susceptible to diseases that in previous times it would have been a snap to fight off. Increasingly, we are forced to choose between the capitalist system or the immune system.

The alarming situation in the U.S. cries out for a radical anti-reductionist approach to what it means to be healthy and a no-holds-barred attack on everything destroying our health today. We must immediately:

- put an end to the poisoning of our food, air, water.

- shut down all nuclear power plants and urban waste incinerators.
- force companies to do massive environmental clean-ups, especially in high-lead, mercury, PCBs and asbestos areas.
- relocate sewage treatment facilities out of the inner cities.
- end all toxic dumping, both at home and abroad. Clean up the primarily Black, Latino and working class areas that receive the brunt of U.S.-generated industrial wastes.
- in populated areas, shut down all factories that generate toxic wastes, and severely regulate them elsewhere.
- ban most pesticides, herbicides, additives, non-organic fertilizer and antibiotics in agriculture and in animal feed.
- nip Bovine Growth Hormone in the bud, and throw its criminal manufacturers in prison.
- shut down all genetic engineering facilities.
- end cash-crop agriculture around the world. This has destroyed people's self-sufficiency and nutritional basis, in exchange for creating centralized, privatized ownership of land by giant multinational corporations, strip-mining the land to produce cash-crops for export. Tens of millions of children starve to death each year, as a result.
- support massive land redistribution (in the U.S. as well as elsewhere) and efforts to develop sustainable organic agriculture, which would give rise to new and more healthy patterns of consumption as well as production.

Subvert the Dominant Paradigm

The deaths of people who have Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) continue to wrack our communities. We are among the many activists who continue to demand the federal government vastly increase spending on AIDS research and treatment, IN ADDITION TO increasing funding to fight cancers, heart disease, and so forth.

But we are also concerned about how this research is being done, and its narrow focus on so-called "genetic predispositions" to particular diseases. The first and foremost avenue of research and treatment for all diseases is to repair the toxicity of the polluted environment.

Strangely, too many of those who routinely criticize governmental economic and foreign policies fail to challenge capitalism's scientific policies as well, which are similarly awash in hidden assumptions and drenched in ideology. Those assumptions guide the research into which we demand public funds be allocated. Much of the actual scientific understanding (or lack thereof) of the AIDS and cancer epidemics is severely limited or even skewed by the hidden ways in which capitalist ideology shapes researchers' whole approach to disease.

As Stephen J. Gould wrote more than two decades ago in "Ever Since Darwin":

“Science is no inexorable march to truth, mediated by the collection of objective information and the destruction of ancient superstition. Scientists, as ordinary human beings, unconsciously reflect in their theories the social and political constraints of their times. As privileged members of society, more often than not they end up defending existing social arrangements as biologically foreordained.”

Many sacred cows are being toppled these days; yet Big Science, somehow, has managed to appear above it all. Greens and other progressives can no longer afford to relinquish the field of science and scientific research to the obviously self-interested assertions of the American Medical Association, the pharmaceutical industry, the tobacco industry and the federal government.

Let us look anew at some of those unmasked assumptions in light of our growing understanding of how capitalism operates:

- Is fluoridation of water beneficial for our health, now that we know that that program was developed as a means for the aluminum industry to dispose of its toxic wastes in the late 1940s?
- Are nuclear power plants and genetic-engineering factories necessary and desirable, now that we have seen the massive evidence proving the former's devastating effects on our immune system and the latter's concentration on genetically increasing the tolerance of crops for pesticides, the better to poison us?
- Should we give blanket endorsement to the government's push to vaccinate all children, now that -- at least for some vaccines like measles, whooping cough and chicken pox -- epidemiological statistics call into question the pharmaceutical manufacturers' claims about their safety and efficacy, and for others the link to autism, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and other serious health conditions in children? If it were left to the AMA we'd never even know of scientific studies that disprove or at least seriously contradict claims for vaccination and mass dispensation of antibiotics.

Clearly, the magic bullet approach to medicine -- which tries to artificially stimulate the immune system into zapping a germ causing a disease (and, along with it, much of the body's other microorganisms which it needs to function properly) -- is not applicable to many of the diseases we face today which break down the overall immune system. Misuse of yesterday's advances has helped bring on today's nightmares. The astronomical quantities of antibiotics fed and injected into animals grown and tortured for mass-consumption, along with mandatory vaccinations in humans, has helped generate resistant strains of germs and, at the same time, may have so compromised our immune systems over a long period that we are suddenly susceptible to diseases that people in prior generations had been able to ward off.

Many studies that document that hypothesis are, like the immune system they discuss, systematically suppressed; they threaten the profits of the giant drug companies. Genetic research is too lucrative, both monetarily and ideologically, for capitalism to fund and promote holistic approaches to health care. Bovine Growth Hormone, a dangerous genetically-engineered drug injected into cows, increases the amount of other hormones in drinking milk and dairy products by 1,000 percent. Yet it was approved by the Food and Drug Administration with scant testing under pressure from the Monsanto corporation which owns the patent, and the milk is now sold on the market without even requiring so much as a label. Companies, such as Ben & Jerry's, which refuse to use BGH milk and label their products to that effect, have been sued by Monsanto and pressured by the federal government to remove their labels.

More and more, parents are being blamed for their children's diseases. (They've passed along bad

genes, we're told.) Genetic screening tests are not used to correct dangerous conditions on-the-job but to fire workers who are said to be genetically predisposed to certain illnesses that could be brought on by the chemicals involved in production. Many companies now try to ascertain a worker's genetic suitability for work in a cancer-causing environment instead of cleaning up the workplace to avoid exposing any workers to cadmium and other carcinogens. It has been more than 18 years since DuPont began screening workers for an alleged genetic predisposition to sickle-cell anemia. The result? An increase in the number of unemployed Black DuPont workers, fired from jobs that, the company claimed, might bring on the disease, based solely on their inherited genetic characteristics. Increasingly, we're taught that it's our own fault, as the system tries to elude responsibility for its environmental devastation and poisoning of the earth and tries to get us to blame the victim -- in this case, ourselves.

Creating a New Scientific Method

Even the Science section of the NY Times has finally begun to challenge some of the reductionist methodology of western medicine and look again at correlative relationships that had been incorrectly certified as causal ones. On December 24, 1991, a front page article by Natalie Angier, drawing on work which had been printed in a recent issue of *The Quarterly Review of Biology* by Dr. George C. Williams, an evolutionary biologist at SUNY Stony Brook, and Dr. Randolph M. Nesse, a psychiatrist at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor, recounts new calls for physicians to heed the wisdom of Darwin, and to take the principles of evolution and natural selection into account as they seek to cure their patients. Just because a fever occurs when a person is sick, the researchers point out, doesn't mean that the fever is necessarily a symptom of the disease. Just the opposite. Biologists argue that clinicians often ignore the fundamental concepts of evolution, as when they treat a fever with aspirin, even though fever is a highly effective method that mammals have evolved for combating invasive bacteria.

In fact, *The Times* continues, a moderate fever is among the most impressive mechanisms in the body's defense repertory. Not only does a higher temperature stimulate the activity of the body's warrior white blood cells, allowing them to race to the site of an infection more rapidly and consume microbes more readily; a fever also inhibits the growth of many strains of interloping bacteria, which, unlike white blood cells, become torpid in the heat and begin to die off. According to one researcher, Dr. Matthew Kluger (University of Michigan), there have been no comprehensive studies exploring the possibility that aspirin, when used effectively to reduce fevers, prolongs a patient's illness as a result.

Correlations are often mistaken for causes, in health care as much as in politics. We need to challenge assumptions that lead us to err in that manner. Angier explains: Darwinists argue, for example, that the wretched morning sickness familiar to pregnant women is not an unfortunate hormonal side effect of childbearing, as had long been believed, but the best possible thing that can happen to a woman and her baby. ... Dr. Margie Profet of the University of California at Berkeley , suggests that morning sickness has great adaptive value, and that it evolved to protect the growing embryo against any toxins in the mother's diet. She points out that most women suffer from nausea and vomiting during the first trimester of pregnancy, which is exactly when the embryo's organs are forming and hence when the developing infant is most vulnerable to even trace poisons in the diet.

'Pregnancy sickness is an adaptation that evolved to protect the embryo against toxins that cause malformations or abortions,' she said. 'Toxins that are easy for an adult to handle can be dangerous for an early embryo.'

In another instance, Darwinists say that when a patient with an infectious illness suffers a seemingly

dangerous dip in iron levels, a symptom some doctors find alarming and frantically try to treat, the patient's body may in fact be working at peak performance to recover. ... The [iron dip] response is not an aberration, but rather another potent defense against microbial foes. Scientists have learned that bacteria, fungi and parasites need iron to survive and divide, so that the body labors to keep the precious metal from them. After infection, a chain of enzymatic reactions sops up most of the iron from the bloodstream and sequesters it in the liver, beyond the grasp of the bacteria, making it very difficult for most pathogens to survive. There it remains until the infection is through.

And when the body's iron-withholding response is combined with a fever, reports Dr. Eugene D. Weinberg, a microbiologist at Indiana University in Bloomington, the tactic becomes a sort of one-two punch: an elevated temperature blocks a microbe's ability to snatch away iron packets from the host enzymes that are ferrying the nutrient to the liver.

Clearly, correlations between disease and fever, microbes and iron-level dips, and estrogen levels in pregnant women and morning sickness can no longer be translated into simplistic cause and effect thinking. Fever is not a symptom of a bacterial disease, but one way the body responds to infection to restore its health; low iron levels during some illnesses should not be met with iron supplements, for that would compromise a natural body defense mechanism to the disease.

Take sickle-cell anemia, for example: Although the exact molecular basis for that disease has been known for more than 30 years, scientists still don't understand why people afflicted with the condition become seriously ill as young children, while others are affected much later and to a far less serious degree. Carrying the sickle-cell gene from both parents produces an increased possibility of developing sickle-cell anemia at some point. But -- and here's an interesting and unpredicted fact -- carry the gene for sickle-cell anemia from just one parent and it generates a natural resistance to malaria -- a totally different disease!

It is impossible to predict the impact of isolated nutrients or genetic material on the development of the entire organism, for at each level of complexity and organization new relationships and interactions emerge that do not exist at more elemental levels. Any understanding of an individual's relationship to the ecosystem in which they live, and at the same time to the ecosystem within each of us, requires new ways of seeing that carry us beyond the isolated cause and effect linearity to which we are accustomed and upon which capitalist science is based.

Cause and effect is limited to events that take place within one particular level of organization (and even there only in part). The implications of events upon a higher or lower level of organization cannot be deciphered through linear cause and effect reasoning any more than, according to the physicist Werner Heisenberg, one can predict both the location and the momentum of a single electron at any moment, however rational it might seem that we be able to do so. Natural science, Heisenberg wrote, does not simply describe or explain nature. It is part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning.

Such a dialectical (or holistic) approach to science and health care is essential in understanding our own bodies in the context of industrial capitalism's assault upon them, as we strive to become our own experts. However, at an ever-increasing rate, medical researchers have been narrowing their focus to the genetic level, avoiding holistic or whole-system analyses. The implication of doing so, politically, is to let the system off the hook and turn research itself into a factory-like industry, raking in big bucks for high-tech drug companies and university researchers funded by them.

On the other hand, large grassroots movements have emerged over the last two decades challenging the industrial medical model and those who profit from it. They have begun to develop new frameworks for understanding the non-predictive impact of localized, level-specific events on more complex as well as on more elemental levels of organization -- the beginnings of a truly non-capitalist, dialectical scientific methodology that integrates the ecological dimension outside the body with the health of the individual human being and what goes on inside of us.

Underground buyers' clubs like DAAIR (Direct AIDS Alternative Information Resources) in New York City, run by people with AIDS; the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP); the National Black Women's Health Project; women's self-help clinics; affinity groups that fight against Bovine Growth Hormone; the Safe Foods Campaign; the No Spray Coalition's and breast cancer coalition's fight against the mass and indiscriminate spraying of toxic pesticides, and groups that advocate nutritional supplementation are creating the basis for a people's health care from the bottom up. And they all are under attack by the government, the American Medical Association, the tobacco industry and the giant pharmaceutical companies. With the assistance and involvement of conscious socialists like ourselves, their impact on the development of new models for maintaining health and treating illness will be profound.

People have a right to their own forms of health care free from government repression. Greens and other activists must critique the limitations and underlying philosophy of capitalist medicine; we must include in our programs health care options being created by people struggling against what the system has done to us; and, we must demand that THESE, and not industrial science's reductionist models, be publicly funded.

Greens need to begin critiquing not only the unfair and unequal application of technology, healthcare and science, but the science itself; we all must become our own experts, and learn from other traditions than that offered by capitalism's industrial medical model.

By involving ourselves in this effort and counterposing science from-the-bottom-up to it, as manifest in these excellent local projects, as our living critique of capitalist science and its underlying reductionist philosophy, we will be able to help a vibrant, conscious working class emerge, one that can begin conceiving of itself as the bearer of a healthy and truly free society.

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